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**Occasionally one of our stories will be called an "Off-the-Trail" story, a warning that it is in some way different from the usual magazine stories, perhaps a little different, perhaps a good deal. It may violate a canon of literature or a custom of magazines, or merely be different from the type usually found in this magazine. The difference may lie in unusual theme, material, ending, or manner of telling. No question of relative merit is involved.*

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A free question and answer service bureau of information on outdoor life and activities everywhere. Comprising sixty-seven geographical sub-divisions, with special sections on Radio, Mining and Prospecting, Weapons, Fishing, Forestry, Aviation, Army Matters, North American Anthropology, Health on the Trail, Herpetology, Entomology and Railroading.

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Cover Design . . . . **H. W. Arnold**

One Complete Novel and Two Complete Novelettes

WHISPERED words from desert and city summoned *Mohamed Ali* to save his fatherland from Spanish arms and the gold of a stubborn millionaire. "SHIELDS OF ISLAM" is a complete novel by George E. Holt in the next issue.

"*PAPPY" BEASLEY* made the best persimmon beer in the mountains of Texas and he admitted it; but he wouldn't admit that he had a hand in the killing of "*Big*" *Maxwell.* "HAWG TRACKS," a complete novelette by G. W. Barrington, is in the next issue.

FROM Chesapeake Bay to Texas was spread a net to catch the ships of the air. "MARSTON AND ME," a complete novelette of the U. S. Aviation Service, by Thomson Burtis, is in the next issue.

Other stories in the next issue are forecast on the last page of this one.

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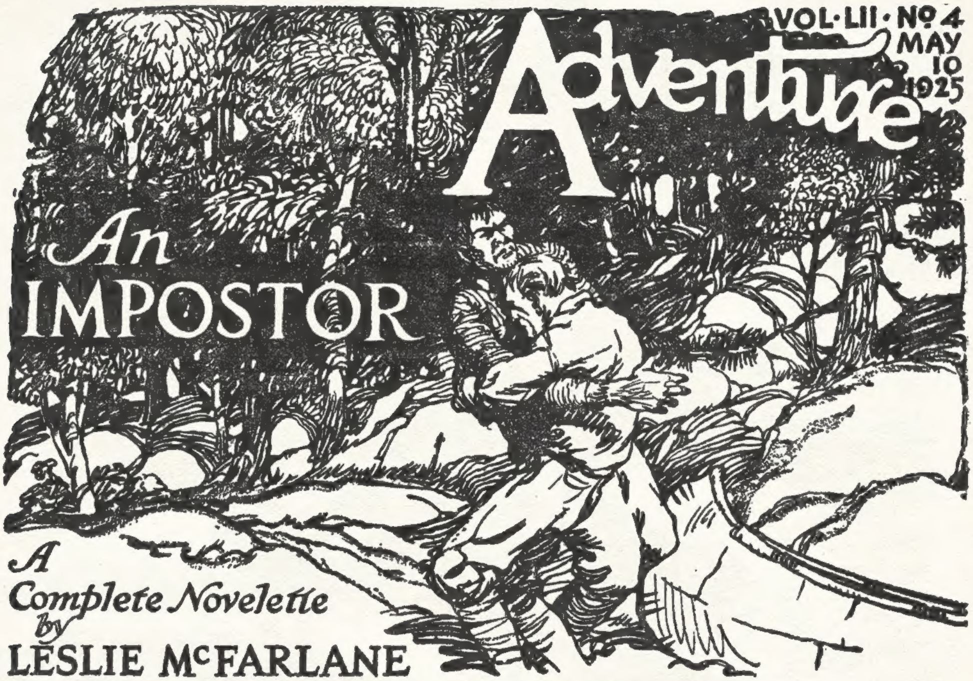

An IMPOSTOR

A Complete Novelette
by
LESLIE McFARLANE

Author of "The River Trail."

IT WAS a dull night in Wigwam Falls. Most nights in Wigwam Falls are dull, for that matter, save perhaps in the spring, when the lumberjacks emerge from the woods, but this was in the autumn and Wigwam Falls had succumbed to the uttermost depths of dullness.

Feeble street lamps glimmered sadly along the wide main thoroughfare, deserted, swept by a damp wind from across the river. Red and green lights shone from the railway crossing, for transcontinental trains pause briefly at Wigwam Falls in their journeys across the vast breadth of northern Ontario. The sullen roar of the falls which gave the place its name sounded above the desultory moaning of the wind.

The few stores were in darkness, and at the ramshackle hotel on the corner was the only sign of activity; even this oasis in a desert of drab solitude was cheerless enough. Michael Blake, coming down the stairs from his tiny room on the first, and only, floor, surveyed the rotunda, so called by courtesy only, without enthusiasm and with a rising loathing for Wigwam Falls and all that was therein.

A neglected and discouraged fire burned in the stone fireplace beneath the inevitable, moose head of benign and moth-eaten aspect.

At a table in a gloomy corner, a bespectacled commercial traveller was fussily scribbling, grumbling to himself about the poor light, in tones intended to be audible to the clerk, who sat behind the desk reading a newspaper three days old. Michael Blake, who minded his own business but loved company, felt the contagion of this depressing scene and, as a last resort, moved towards the soft-drink bar.

He had the air of a man who knows his way about; the idly confident bearing of a man who has been in many places. His clear, firm skin was bronzed by many suns, his gray eyes were alert and cool, with the steady calm of eyes which have seen much and no longer widen with surprize at anything. His firm mouth was strong at the corners; it was the mouth of a man who has faced danger and who has suffered hardship, but has not lost the capacity for laughter. He was tall, with the shoulders of a fighter and the grace of a dancer.

He had worked in a mine in Peru; he had been with a survey party in South Africa; he had washed dishes in a New Orleans

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café; he had been a deck hand on a tramp steamer off Vancouver; he had been a newspaperman in Havana; he had sniped Germans from a tree in Flanders; he had driven a motor truck in Southern France; he had idled a summer in England; once, for a few weeks, he had been a movie extra in Hollywood.

Of late, he had been with a survey party in northern Ontario, but now the work was done and he had money in his pockets and was wondering where to go next. He was a wandering Jack of all trades with an insatiable craving for change, a perpetual restlessness.

Men would call him a roamer, and envy him his freedom; women would call him an adventurer and admire him for his strength and good looks, fear him a little, perhaps, for his experience. And he was not yet thirty.

AS HE entered the soft-drink bar he privately resolved to take the first train out of Wigwam Falls in the morning. There was action and adventure in northern Canada, of a surety, but not in Wigwam Falls.

There had been a drab little town in Louisiana, where strange events had happened; there had been a country village in England where death had nipped at his heels; but this bleak little place in the wilds was as prosaic as a churchyard, and not one half so interesting. He did not know where he would go; he had Montreal in mind, but it did not matter greatly. He would leave Wigwam Falls, and quickly.

There were three or four men in the low-ceilinged, dimly lighted room, and they stared at him without interest as he came up to the bar. Strangers are the rule in Wigwam Falls. No one stays there very long.

The barkeep, a squat, bald-headed man with a cast in one eye, which gave him an expression of infinite malignance, flourished the ever present cloth and glanced inquiringly at Blake. He had a fat, unhealthy face, the barkeep, as expressionless as that of a sleeping Chinaman, and when the newcomer ordered ginger ale he swept a bottle and a glass upon the bar, scooped up the money, rang it up, slapped back the change and resumed his duties with the cloth, all in one brief verse of movement.

Blake lounged against the bar and drank his ginger ale slowly. The idlers discoursed in low tones. The whole atmosphere of the place was one of depression and staleness. There was a yellowed clock over the doorway, but its hands had ceased moving at half past two of some morning or afternoon in the forgotten past, in futile protest at the marking of time in a place where nothing ever seemed to change.

There was a fly-specked calendar upon the wall, but it was a calendar of the year before and it silently insisted that the month was still December. It was a dead room, a room mummified by drab despondency.

A slight, stoop-shouldered fellow, in ragged overalls, appeared silently through a door behind the bar, dumped a bucket upon the floor and sloshed a mop in the water.

"Hello, 'Prince,' " grunted the barkeep. "Hard at it, eh?"

The Prince did not look up. He slapped the dripping mop down on the floor in front of the bar, and commenced to scrub, mechanically.

"Work all day and all night too around here," he replied with a trace of bitterness.

"First time this here place has been scrubbed for ages," observed the barkeep.

"And I hope it's the last."

Blake looked at the fellow curiously. The British accent had been unmistakable; this doubtless accounted for the soubriquet of Prince. He had seen not a few of these "Dukes" and "Lords" in his time, broken-down remittance men, dissipated younger sons, in the queer corners of the earth.

The Prince was not old, about his own age, Blake would judge, but he was not rugged and there was a listless, dispirited air about him which made him seem much older than he was, gave him almost the appearance of middle age, and defeated middle age at that. He wore no collar; his overalls were too large for him, and hung with voluminous and despondent wrinkles on his slight form; his shoes were old and lusterless, there were holes in them which needed patching.

He had blond hair, his face was pale and drawn, his mouth drooped at the corners, and his chin was weak. His hair and the slightness of his build gave some substance to the royal nickname, but he was a caricature of the prince.

His shoulders were hunched as he moved the mop back and forth in monotonous sweeps, but in spite of his bent and listless appearance there was about him a faint, indefinable air of distinction, something inexpressibly different, something which set him apart from all other bar-room roustabouts, a vaguely pathetic dignity which seemed to cling to him in spite of all the meanness of his surroundings, all the poverty of his appearance, all the dejection of his bearing.

Blake glanced at the barkeep and the latter, noting his interest in the Prince, allowed a flicker of expression to cross his fat, impassive face, and his upper lip was raised slightly in the suspicion of a contemptuously tolerant smile. It was a smile that seemed to say:

"Poor ——! We're better than he is, of course, but one can't help feeling sorry for him."

It was a smile that seemed to bespeak a certain regard for the Prince, a certain recognition of the fellow's indispensability in the scheme of things, in reassuring the barkeep against uncomfortable suspicions of his own inferiority by the knowledge that here, at least, was some one to whom even he was superior.

The Prince leaned his mop against the wall, picked up the bucket and disappeared for more water. Blake smiled at the barkeep, and that individual, suspending for a moment his lateral motions with the cloth, came over and leaned pudgy elbows on the bar and whispered hoarsely—

"What d'yuh think of our royal floor scrubber?"

"Royal?"

Blake raised his eyebrows.

The barkeep sniggered unpleasantly.

"Well, not royal exactly, but near it."

He regarded Blake shrewdly. He was fond of gossip, was the barkeep, and there was something about Blake which invited confidences.

"Would yuh believe it," asked the barkeep, glancing to either side of him as he spoke and then resting his malignant gaze upon Blake again, "if I told yuh that there bum comes from one of the best families in England?"

He paused, triumphantly, having delivered himself of this sensation, and stood back to observe its effect, as an artist will stand back to observe his canvas. The barkeep's pallid face betrayed his disappointment when Blake showed no undue interest, beyond a mild, "Really?"

But he went on, persistent.

"Yes, sir. One of the best families in England!" His hoarse, confidential tones held awe. "His father was a dook, they say."

"A duke?"

"Yes sir. And his mother—" the barkeep again paused for affect—"his mother is a dookess."

Blake tapped his fingers idly on the bar and wagged his head in polite astonishment.

"And what's he doing here?" he asked, not from any real desire to know, but more because the barkeep plainly expected some such inquiry.

The barkeep sniggered again. It was a most disagreeable snigger, with no humor in it.

"He's goin' up to see his uncle," he confided, his tones more hoarse than ever. "His uncle that's the Northland Comp'ny factor at Deer Landing. The young fellow's been bummin' around here for a week waitin' for Indians to come up the river for him. Up against it, he is."

"Broke, eh?"

"Broke! Worse'n that, even. He comes in here on a freight about a week ago. Comes in on a freight, with his fine clothes all rags and cinders. Beat his way from Quebec, he said. One of the boys got him tight the other day—he likes his booze—" the barkeep sniggered again—"and he talked a little. That's how we know. About his father bein' a dook and everything."

The "we" evidently comprised the entire population of Wigwam Falls.

"He doesn't look much like a duke's son now."

"I should sa-a-ay not. Oh well—" the barkeep picked up the cloth again and slowly recommenced his polishing—"booze done it. Booze and the girls. He bust down and cried when he told about it."

He moved down the bar in response to an order from a newcomer, and Blake reflected on the Prince. Son of a duke, he was. Well, the duke business was not flourishing as well in England of late as it had in other years, Blake knew. Taxes, taxes, taxes. He had heard of more than one duke whose finances were as low as his prestige was high. He was not, either, surprized at the reasons the Prince had given for his present plight. Booze and the girls. Many a duke's son had found booze and the girls a little too much for him.

The barkeep, having served his customer, came back down to Blake, seething with new confidences.

"We call him the Prince, we do. He was up against it and he come around to the boss for a job. 'I'm broke,' he says, 'and I've got to eat.' The boss looks him over and says, 'What can yuh do?' he says. 'Nothin' much,' the Prince comes back at him, so the boss says, 'Well, you're honest about it anyway. Yuh can help around the hotel and do odd jobs if yuh want until your Indians come for yuh.'

"And I'll say he's been doin' the odd jobs Everybody bosses him, from the chambermaids to the cook. They've had him workin' day and night, doin' everythin' from peelin' potatoes to makin' beds. A dook's son—peelin' potatoes!"

The barkeep sniggered again and his fat, pallid cheeks shook.

"Do yuh get it?"

Blake did not smile. If, as the barkeep said, this Prince were really a duke's son, it would be a bitter blow to his pride to do the menial tasks required of him around the hotel. Still, it would not hurt him. Do him good. Blake had scant sympathy for the duke's offspring.

"But the best of it is," continued the barkeep, showing a gold tooth as he grinned and leaned further over the bar, warming to his story, "the best of it is that he's goin' to visit his uncle. His uncle, mind you, his uncle that's the factor at Deer Landing. Awchibawld Mainwaring!" The barkeep essayed a feeble imitation of a British accent, and sniggered once more. "What a surprize—" he went on hoarsely, evidently on the brink of fresh revelations. "What a surprize—"

Then he stopped, abruptly, and commenced to polish the bar again, and Blake, glancing casually over to the door beside the bar, saw the Prince come in again, his thin shoulders bowed as he staggered in with the big bucket full of water. He dumped the bucket on the floor and straightened up wearily, then reached for the mop, sloshed it in the bucket and began his dreary scrubbing again.

The barkeep looked meaningly at Blake, wagged his pudgy head sorrowfully and then, as a big Polack came in and clumped up to the bar, paused, waiting for the order, his face again a pallid mask.

BLAKE turned to go. He looked indifferently at the Prince, sloshing water on the floor, a picture of hopeless toil. The little fellow slapped the mop heavily, close to the feet of the big Polack.

Some of the water splashed upon the foreigner's mud-caked boots.

The big Polack—he was a six-footer, with a piratical, black mustache—whirled angrily. His white teeth gleamed as he looked down and cursed the Prince. A big hand rose in the air and he swung it down, ponderously, dealing the smaller man a tremendous cuff on the side of the head.

The Prince tumbled over sidewise, across the bucket of water, which upset upon him, and he lay on the floor in a heap, dirty water streaming over his ragged clothes. A harsh laugh rose from the idlers at the other side of the room, and the snigger of the barkeep followed like a minor echo. Then the big Polack, stuttering curses in his own language, stepped over and kicked the prostrate form.

Blake seldom looked for trouble. He had learned that it is the part of wisdom to stay out of other men's quarrels. But this was different. The big Polack was just bringing back his heavy foot for another kick at the helpless man, when Blake reached him at a stride, swinging as he closed in, and his fist caught the big man full in the face, knocking him back against the bar where he slid down on to the floor. He sat here, grotesquely, his legs out in front of him, a bewildered expression on his face.

"Want any more?" invited Blake calmly.

The big fellow was dazed and he merely mumbled incoherently as he swayed drunkenly in an attempt to rise.

Blake turned to the Prince, who had got to his feet in the mean time and was bending to pick up the mop again.

"All right?" he asked.

"I'm all right, sir," replied the other, looking at him with watery blue eyes and nervously fumbling at his weak, unshaven chin. "Thank you very much."

"He won't bother you again," laughed Blake, and he turned to go.

The other men in the room had made no move. They had been astonished to an incredulous silence by the stranger's sudden interference. Blake had an impression of them, bunched in a corner, staring, the barkeep, with his mouth wide open, gazing at him from behind the bar, the Prince standing awkwardly beside the overturned pail, in a pool of water, his overalls clinging wetly to his thin legs and the big Polack clumsily struggling to his feet in the shadow.

He had almost reached the door when a sudden sound behind him—it was like a gasp of surprize—caused him to wheel swiftly and he had a quick glimpse of the big Polack standing in front of the bar, a revolver glinting in his hand.

He saw this in the fraction of a second; there was no time to duck, no time to drive for cover, the revolver was bearing directly upon him and, as he plunged sidewise, hunching his shoulders, it was with the swift knowledge that he could not be quick enough to escape the bullet; the revolver barked with a roar that shattered the stillness of the room.

Then he heard something clatter to the floor. He was unhurt. He looked up. It had happened so quickly that it was a second or so before he realized that the Polack was standing there, empty-handed, and that the Prince was crouching forward, holding the mop with which he had dashed the weapon from the big fellow's grasp.

These impressions registered themselves upon his mind with the quick precision of a cinematograph, he did not reason out the explanation, he simply knew, and he flung himself across the room upon the revolver before the Polack had recovered from his surprize.

He had picked it up and pressed it against the ribs of the big fellow in a second. A tremor passed through the Polack's body and his hands shot upward, automatically.

The bystanders recovered from their inaction. There was a sound of thudding footsteps outside the door.

"You dirty skunk," roared a lean, leathern-visaged man who stepped forward from the shadows and glared into the Polack's swarthy face.

"Pull a gun behind a fellow's back like that, would ye? Ye—ye——"

He stammered in his anger, unable to find words in which to villify the man. Blake, curiously enough, reflected that it was strange that the lean man should stand by and watch the Polack kick a prostrate victim, without protest, yet should be so ready with condemnation for a breach of the code of gunplay.

There was a chattering, excited, confused, as the other bystanders crowded around; the hoarse voice of the barkeep could be heard, imploring, "Gentlemen—gentlemen—" and the swing doors banged open as half a dozen men, attracted by the sound of the shot, bustled into the room. In the lead was a man in official blue uniform wearing a trim, blue cap, a shiny leather revolver holster high on his wide belt—a provincial policeman.

The rising gabble of voices died down as the officer walked over to where Blake stood with his revolver pressed close to the Polack's body, while the big fellow stared, sullen and frightened, at the floor.

"Well, what's the trouble?" asked the officer, very casually.

"This danged hunky took a shot at the stranger here," explained the lean man, loudly, pushing forward. "Took a shot at him when his back was turned. If it hadn't been for the Prince here, he'd 'a' plugged him sure. I seen him."

"That right?" asked the officer, taking the revolver from Blake and slipping it into his pocket.

"I don't think he meant it," said Blake carelessly. "It was accidental. Anyway, I hit him first."

It was an idiotic speech he knew, but the officer understood his intent. Blake had no desire to become implicated in any court proceedings over this affair. They would be tedious and annoying. Enough for him that the Polack had failed.

"This your gun, Petroff?" asked the officer, who had sized up the situation readily enough.

The big fellow nodded and grumbled something unintelligible, but the officer took him by the arm.

"Come along with me then. You know mighty well you're not allowed to pack a gun. Come on, now."

He hustled the man through the silent crowd, over to the door. There he turned and called to Blake.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"Mike Blake."

"Staying at the hotel?"

"Yes."

"All right, Mr. Blake. Sorry this fellow troubled you."

He disappeared with his prisoner.

THE bigger part of the crowd drifted away in the wake of the pair and within a minute the bar had regained its customary atmosphere of unalloyed calm. Those who remained showed no disposition to discuss the affair with Blake and he, in turn, had no desire to discuss it with any one.

But the Prince. He owed his life to the fellow. If that mop hadn't swung through the air at the precise instant it did, Blake knew he would be lying with a bullet in him at that very moment. He looked hastily around and saw the Prince disappearing through the small door beside the bar, the mop flopping dismally over his shoulder, the empty pail clanking as he walked.

He hurried after him and caught up to the Prince in a small, dingy ante room. The other man looked around in surprize as Blake came in. He put down the pail and looked at him uncertainly.

"I want to thank you," said Blake simply, extending his hand. "That fellow might have got me."

The Prince smiled, faintly, and put out his hand. Blake noticed that his weak eyes avoided any direct gaze and that his handclasp was lifeless. The Prince was a most unheroic figure in his wet, ragged clothes, his shoulders sloped dispiritedly. His smile was merely a change of expression.

"I thank you," he replied, with a slight emphasis on the "you."

His eyes looked into Blake's for an instant, then shifted, uneasily.

"It was good of you to stand up for me there—when that swine kicked me."

Blake grimaced humorously.

"Only thing to do. Teach the beggar a lesson. But you did more for me. You swung that mop in the nick of time." He hesitated. "If there's anything I can do——?"

The Prince straightened up a little.

"No—there's nothing."

His tones were dead, spiritless, yet behind them one sensed a restraint.

"Anything at all," Blake insisted easily.

The other man stared at the floor for a moment and then looked up again.

"I don't know," he said in his low, emotionless voice. "It's hard, of course—to tell a stranger, you see——"

"Blake is my name. Michael Blake."

"I didn't mean it that way, quite." The man waved a hand, with a trace of impatience. "But I do need some help, some advice——I do not like to ask it——"

Blake smiled. He had the sort of smile that would charm the hearts of women and warm the hearts of men, and the Prince responded to its contagious friendliness. Blake clapped him lightly on the shoulder and said:

"Come on, old man. Tell me the story. If I can help you at all——"

He was one of those rare men who can clap another on the back and call him "old man" without being faintly offensive. There was a new light in the thin, sad face of the Prince, as he smiled back and then moved over to a door near-by.

"I have a room," he said. "Such as it is. If you'll come in."

"Thank you."

Blake stepped through the door into the narrow little cubby hole which was the chamber of the Prince, in which the sole piece of furniture was a small cot.

"I HAVE no chair to offer you," apologized his host, flushing a little, and they sat down upon the cot. It was a bare little room, like a cell, and the Prince, sitting dejectedly, his shoulders bent as he placed his elbows on his knees and cupped his chin in his hands, was like a prisoner not yet resigned to his degradation.

It was some time before he spoke, and Blake tactfully kept silent; he realized that it would doubtless come hard to the man to ask for help and that it would be difficult for him to phrase his request. When he did speak, finally, the Prince began abruptly, not looking at Blake at all, his eyes fixed on the door in front of him.

"My name is Treniff," he said. "George Treniff—grandson of the late Earl of Raymouth."

So it was not a duke. Oh well, the barkeep would hardly know the difference.

"I'm of good family, you see. Although I don't look it," he added bitterly.

"Yes?"

"I have an uncle," went on Treniff. "His name's Mainwaring, and he's factor of the Northland Company post up the river at Deer Landing. I'm on my way to him now."

"He will be glad to see you."

Treniff got to his feet and paced over to the wall nervously, then turned quickly and looked at Blake. He was distraught.

"He's never seen me before. He left England years ago. Can you imagine it?" he asked. "Can you imagine me going to see him, like this?"

A white hand gestured towards himself. It was eloquent. It took in not only his ragged, dirty clothes, his broken shoes, but his pale, dissipated face, all the details of his weak and miserable figure, in one damning, accusatory motion. It seemed to say:

"Look at me. Am I not a caricature of a man? Can you picture me as any person's guest?"

Blake watched him shrewdly, and Treniff continued, the words tumbling from his lips, in the manner of one, unused to silence, who has remained silent for a long time.

"It was my mother," he continued, speaking abruptly, hastily, his voice keyed high. "She had no idea, no idea whatever. She didn't know how I'd been living since I came to Canada. She insisted that I go and visit my uncle—that's Mainwaring, you see. God knows, I should do it. He sent my mother money for years after he came out to this country, sent her money to have me brought up as a gentleman, because I'm his only nephew, the last of the line, you understand.

"When my grandfather died there were only the three of them, my mother and her two brothers. The oldest, my other uncle, went through the estate in five years—and he shot himself. My mother, my uncle, they had no idea, until after the crash. There was little enough left, in money. Plenty of position, but no money.

"Mother took an apartment in London. There was enough to put up a show, as if nothing were wrong. My uncle came to Canada. He's been at Deer Landing for years. He had some influence—that's how he got the factorship."

"And your mother?"

"She—she's got along. It was hard for her."

Treniff turned from the shadow and the yellow electric light shone on his thin face, which softened for a moment.

"She'd been accustomed to the better things for so long. My father died when I was quite young. He had no money. Everything depended on the estate, you see. But one can economize; she's kept up position, social position. She is proud. It means a lot. Perhaps you don't understand—the family name, and all that sort of thing, you know——"

"I understand," said Blake, sympathetically, noticing that Treniff had stopped and was regarding him with a faint expression of doubt, as if fearing his guest might not appreciate the phrase.

"My uncle is that way, too," he went on, reassured. "He sent her money. It was to put me through school. I think he sent all he could save, for years. Anything to keep up the name. To be worthy of the family. And look now!"

Again that swift, accusatory motion of the white hand.

"How," inquired Blake, gently, "did it happen?"

"How does it happen to anybody?" Treniff spoke bitterly, dryly. "At school, keep up the farce. Gamble a bit, because gentlemen gamble. Learn to win another man's money and look sorry; learn to lose your last shilling and smile—like a hypocrite.

"Drink a lot, for a gentleman must hold his liquor well. Women—a gentleman doesn't talk about his women, but that's about all there is of honor in it. Perhaps I'm not a gentleman. I gambled too much. I drank too much. There were too many women. There was a little scandal over a gambling debt—not much, you know."

"Just enough."

"Yes, just enough. It was decided that I should travel. Mother kept up the farce. She explained that I was touring the world in a gentlemanly manner. Really, I was working in an office in Montreal. It had been arranged very discreetly. I held the job a month. Montreal was too much for me. Mother never knew. Things went from bad to worse. The way I've lived——"

"And then?"

"Mother had written to my uncle, suggested that I should visit him. Didn't wait till he suggested it—she's like that, you know. He wrote back. He didn't seem very enthusiastic to me. I have the letter. But he said he would have Indians here to meet me this month. And there I was, in Montreal, without any money. God knows, I didn't want to go. I lay about Montreal for a week, drunk, before I decided that I would have to do it, and then I worked, and stole rides on trains until I got here."

"But you're here."

"Yes, and I've got to face my uncle yet. You don't know, you can't understand how I dread that. For he'll see. He'll know. I'm practically a tramp, a beggar, now. And he's a Mainwaring. Do you know what that means?

"It's because of the name that my mother pinched and saved, endured years of deception, to keep up a social position without much money behind it, when she could have been living comfortably in some obscure little place. Perhaps it sounds foolish to you, but these things are ingrained in one over there. It's because he's a Mainwaring that my uncle sent my mother money for my schooling, that I'd be brought up as a gentleman, keep up the family pride. You don't know, you can't know, what it means. But there it is. Family!"

He paused and looked at Blake almost defiantly; his face had lost its listless expression and his eyes their dullness, and he was eager, painfully eager and in earnest.

"Why, my uncle," he continued, "even has the family crest on his private stationery. A factor up in the wilderness! And the crest is over the door of his office. My mother's shown me pictures of the place. Oh, he's proud. The family crest!"

The Prince laughed sardonically.

"Can you imagine what he'll think, what he'll say, if I go up to him like this. Me, the last of the line, the fellow he educated, the gentleman! Can't you see how it would hurt him! A Mainwaring!"

"He would be disappointed a little, perhaps," agreed Blake, gently.

For by now he had a mental picture of the factor at Deer Landing, one of those proud old Englishmen, far from their own country, who seek to maintain a link with their former lives; in a far land, stifling a deep longing for home and the hedgerows of their own countryside by a fragile imitation of the old life; a stern and pathetic aristocracy, clinging pitifully to the threads of a forgotten glory and a battered pride.

He knew them. He remembered an old English colonel, farming in Manitoba, who made a ceremony of raising the Union Jack on a flagpole in front of his poor cabin every morning and lowering it every sundown. He had known a remittance man whose dogged endeavors to grow primroses in Mexican soil had made him the butt of a city's jests.

Yes, the factor at Deer Landing would probably be a bit disappointed in his nephew, this frail, ragged, broken creature beside him.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "a little loan—temporary, of course — you could buy clothes——"

The Prince shook his head, sadly.

"Clothes. They'd help, a little. But he'd know. He'd know. I could not fool him. And it wouldn't be right. Even clothes won't hide it—the life I've led. You can see, can't you? Clothes won't make me a gentleman. Why, you—your clothes aren't Bond Street, you're dressed like dozens of others around here—but you're a gentleman. It's something about one. You can't define it; you can't explain it. I'm not. I know it. I'm a waster. He wouldn't be fooled."

BLAKE felt embarrassed. The matter of being a gentleman was something to which he had never given much thought. He had an innate strength of character, an ability to look out for himself, a certain consideration for others and he had the ease of one who has been in many places and who can look the world in the eye. But—being a gentleman. It amused him, yet made him feel strangely uncomfortable, disquieted.

Yet he knew that the Prince was right. Clothes would not hide the weakness, the evidences of dissipation, the broken spirit The uncle would not be fooled. He would be bitterly disappointed.

"Look," said Treniff, stepping forward suddenly and sitting down on the cot. "Would you consider—would you, perhaps —you've asked if you could do anything for me——"

He hesitated, then shook his head, quickly and began to pluck at the rough blanket, with his fingers.

"No, you couldn't. I shouldn't ask you."

"Go ahead, old man," encouraged Blake. "Don't be afraid. I meant what I said. Anything I can do. My time is my own, any money I have is at your disposal. I'm not forgetting that you saved my life a few minutes ago, remember."

"Oh, as to that, don't think I'm asking anything in return. You are under no obligation, not for worlds."

"I know. I know," assured Blake. "But you're in trouble. I understand your position. What were you going to ask of me?"

Treniff continued plucking the edge of the blanket, and then he looked up, quickly.

"It was your manner of talking put the idea into my head. You've been in England?"

"For a while."

"One often acquires a trace of the accent, unconsciously perhaps. But you would pass for an Englishman by your accent. That's why I ask it. Would you—could you go up to Deer Landing in my stead?" he blurted.

"It's foolish of me to ask, I know," he went on hurriedly, "but there's a chance that you might do it. My uncle has never seen me, not even a picture of me since I was a boy. And you have a fair complexion, like myself. He'd never know. It would be only for a week or so."

Blake considered the strange request, gravely. Financial assistance was one thing; impersonation was quite another.

"I've had a chance," Treniff continued. "I've had an opportunity of going up into the bush for a lumber company here, tomorrow. I refused it, because I had to go up to the Landing. But I wanted to take it. I still can. It would give me a new start. It would be good for me. And then, I must do something.

"If I went up to Deer Landing I would be worse off than ever when I came back, for of course I couldn't ask my uncle for money. I couldn't tell him I was penniless. You understand, don't you?"

"It's unusual," commented Blake. "I don't know."

He was puzzled. He would like to help the Prince, not alone because he was indebted to the man, but because he felt vaguely sorry for him, sorry for him, not as the victim of his own folly, but as the victim of a social system, a system of pretense, a system of pride which was false pride, against which the Prince had not a chance to fend for himself.

If, as Treniff said, he had an opportunity to go to work in the woods, it might indeed be the making of him, for Blake judged that, in spite of Treniff's dejection, his lack of spirit, his present low estate, that there was something essentially fine in him. Instead of feeling amusement at the other man's reluctance toward meeting his uncle, he felt a certain admiration for him.

He had been long enough in England, he had mingled enough with Britishers to understand something of the strength of family pride, the ingrown and inculcated forces which place name and pedigree upon an altar, which make of family a fetish. One unused to these things might not have understood, men nurtured in a more democratic atmosphere might have regarded the Prince without sympathy; his disinclination toward having his uncle see him ragged and penniless, weak and broken by dissipation, might have been held as an additional proof of weakness, perhaps cowardice.

The fears of the Prince for his uncle's disappointment might have been scoffed at, but Blake well knew that if Mainwaring were the type Treniff described, he would be more than disappointed, almost heartbroken in fact, when he saw the nephew for whom he had sacrificed so much. For there had been sacrifices, doubtless, sacrifices of which the factor alone would ever know the full extent.

But, to take the place of the Prince. There was a spice of adventure to the proposal, which attracted Blake. It would be a deception, and he was essentially an honest man, but he was not of that class of people so uncompromisingly righteous that the harm done by their rigid virtue often balances the good. It would be a deception in a good cause, to save the old factor from disappointment and sorrow and to enable Treniff to get away to a fresh start. A deception harmless enough, at that.

"You are sure your uncle has never seen any pictures of you as you are now?" he asked.

Treniff's face became illumined with incredulous hope, where before had prevailed depression and misery.

"You—you consider it?"

"It is a bit extraordinary, of course," said Blake, "but the extraordinary appeals to me. Are you sure I could carry it off?"

"I'm positive." Treniff's voice was trembling with eagerness. "You are the sort of a man—the sort he would want me to be. He doesn't know what I look like. He will never see either of us again, for he's an oldish man and he'll stay at the post until he dies. In all the years he has been there he's never left the place. It's been a voluntary exile. He's strange—a strange man."

"When will the Indians be here?"

"I don't know. They should have arrived last week. It's a five day journey, I understand. I have expected them at any time."

"And how long were you going to stay?"

"About a week. They tell me here that if I stay longer there is danger of being caught there, if the weather turns cold."

"The freeze-up."

"That was the term. The freeze-up. It was merely to be a short visit. My uncle hinted that in his letter. He wanted to see me in his lifetime, but you can see how impossible——"

"Certainly," agreed Blake. "If I do this for you, will you promise to get that job you were talking about ? Pull yourself together. Get on your feet again. Do some hard work, and hard thinking. I'm not going to give you a lot of sloppy good advice, Treniff, but you realize yourself that you're not very much of a man—yet."

"I know," said Treniff humbly.

"Being down on your luck the way you've been, won't hurt you. It will help you, if you look at it the right way. And some hard work in the bush will help you more. You go after that job, and don't worry about your uncle. I'll substitute for you."

"You will?"

Treniff smiled. It was a smile of joy, of relief, a genuine smile, and Blake felt content. No man who could smile like that was worthless. He had faith in the pale, slight man beside him.

"If you knew what this means to me——"

"It's enough to know that you're thankful," replied Blake.

Gratitude embarrassed him.

"And now," said Blake, "I'll have to have something to go on. Tell me about your family."

AND so, for almost an hour they sat, like a pupil and a teacher, Treniff relating such details of the family history as might be needful, describing his mother and her mode of life in London, describing what he knew of his uncle's life with such thoroughness that before long Blake felt that he had known them all his life.

He made Treniff drill him constantly in these details until, like a good actor, he felt himself to be George Treniff and all that he represented with all his background, instead of Michael Blake. Not until then was he satisfied that he was able to carry out the part. He rose from the cot.

"I'll be around to see you in the morning," he said, extending his hand.

Treniff took it, almost stunned by this sudden revival of his hopes, the miraculous arrival of this stranger who had so quickly become a friend. Then he drew back his hand quickly.

"No—please," he said, looking at the bill which Blake had pressed into his palm. "I can't take this."

"Don't be a fool," said Blake, opening the door. "You need some clothes—some bush clothes, strong and heavy. Call it a loan if you like."

Before Treniff could protest further he stepped out of the room and the door closed gently behind him. And the Prince, staring at the money, sat down upon the cot again, happy, bewildered, his mind no longer a dull confusion of despair.

FOR three days Blake endured the depression of Wigwam Falls. Treniff departed for the bush and his absence passed almost unnoticed, save by the fat barkeep, who grumbled a little because he had not been around to say good-by. It was assumed that he had gone on to Deer Landing. In a day he had been utterly forgotten.

So far as Blake could see, the chief obstacles in the way of the scheme would be at the very outset. An injudicious word from one of the guides sent down by the factor might reveal the whole deception, a passing remark by some inhabitant of Wigwam Falls might expose the entire plan, but he trusted to luck and when, on the third day, the guides arrived, nothing unforeseen occurred.

From a window of the hotel he saw them coming up the river, paddling slowly, and instinctively he knew that these were the men from Deer Landing. He sauntered down to the shore.

The men had drawn up their canoe and were toiling up the slope of the river as he drew near; they were swarthy, hard-bitten woodsmen and they had evidently traveled far.

One was a tall, rangy half-breed, of sullen and villainous aspect. He wore a red sweater and his trouser legs were stuffed into high, clumsy shoepacks. In dress he differed little from scores of other such men Blake had encountered in the north, but his whole bearing was indescribably sinister.

He had thick, black brows, over eyes which were inky slits in a dark and evil face. Coarse, black hair hung down over his forehead from under a shapeless felt hat; his nose, which had evidently been broken on some remote occasion, was crooked and increased the malignance of his expression; a thin stream of tobacco juice trickled from a corner of his mouth, over the dark stubble of beard on his unshaven chin.

The narrowed eyes gave one an impression of dark and evil thoughts lurking behind them, the thin, twisted mouth hinted at potentialities of untold cruelty, there was a hardness about him, an uncompromising malice even, which rendered him a forbidding figure.

His companion was a full-blooded Indian, fat, brown-faced, inscrutable. He was short of stature, and he waddled as he came up the slope, in marked contrast to the halfbreed, whose stride was surprizingly light and free, swift and silent, like an animal. In fact Blake was minded of a gaunt wolf. The Indian's flat face was heavily pockmarked, and he had the mildly indifferent expression of his race.

Not an attractive pair, surely. But Blake had long since learned not to judge too readily by appearances, so he smiled as they came up to him, and asked—

"Are you from Deer Landing?"

"Broken Nose" regarded him narrowly.

"Yes," he replied, his voice strangely low and mild.

"I'm Treniff," said Blake, easily. "I've been expecting you."

The halfbreed spoke curtly to the Indian, who glanced casually at Blake before venturing a guttural reply.

"I'm ready to start any time you are," proceeded Blake. "When will you go back."

"Today," replied Broken Nose briefly. "Aft' dinner."

The less time they spent in Wigwam Falls the better, reflected Blake, but he knew there was no use suggesting an immediate departure, so he nodded affably and said he would be ready, then walked back up with them to the town.

"How is my uncle?" he inquired of the halfbreed.

"All right," he answered, shortly, and volunteered no further information.

Blake said no more. It was plain that Broken Nose had small desire for conversation, but this disturbed him not at all, for indeed the man was so sullen that he appeared to have a grudge against all mankind.

He seemed a cold, unfriendly soul, filled with bitterness and rancor, and Blake had no wish to seek his friendship. Neither the halfbreed nor the Indian said a word when he bade them good-by at the hotel, but proceeded down the wide, untidy street about their own affairs.

He did not see them again until the afternoon when, after he had brought his pack down to the canoe and waited for them a while, they came in sight, bearing with them a quantity of tobacco and chewing gum, and silently prepared for departure.

At the bidding of Broken Nose, who was to take the stern, he settled himself comfortably in the middle of the canoe, resting comfortably against a rolled tent at his back, while the Indian took the bow. The halfbreed, shoving the canoe free of the shore, leaped into his place with catlike agility, paddles flashed in the afternoon sun, and the canoe glided down the river.

The huddled shacks and tawdry buildings of Wigwam Falls disappeared from sight as they rounded a bend, and in one instant they appeared to have slipped from civilization into the depth of the impenetrable wilderness.

The wooded banks on either side were magnificently primeval. The blue water of the river danced in the sunlight, a million little, quivering spearheads seemed to flash and tremble on the surface of the stream; they were entering, perpetually entering a wide, scintillating pathway of changing, flashing light immediately ahead, into which the canoe was forever gliding and which receded in dancing, blinding reflections of light from the tip of every wave, hidden in its own glamour.

There was an iridescent sheen of brightness, a luminous carnival of shuddering light, intangible, ever-changing yet always the same, cast prodigally upon the waters.

FOR a long while, Broken Nose and the Indian paddled on in a silence broken only by the drip and splash of their paddles and the echoing shrieks and whistles of birds in the dense woods on either hand. In the stern of the canoe, the halfbreed was a dark figure of evil mien, striking a discordant note in all the autumn splendor.

The forest was dense, rising from a tangle of fallen trees, stranded logs, dead branches, bleached white by the sun, along the shores, rising in towering undulations, in vast flamboyancies of yellow, vivid splotches of crimson and vermilion, thin streaks of silver where the birches shot gracefully into view, vagrant shreds of purple, all with a *leit-motif* of solemn green which would remain when all the other colors died.

It was a prodigious panorama which stretched far down the winding reaches of the river, a panorama in which all the colors of the spectrum seemed flung together in a bawdy confusion, a delirious frenzy, but in which nothing clashed and which gave to all the wild magnificence an overwhelming beauty.

Blake sat dreamily in the canoe, his eyes half-closed, enjoying the pagan glory of the scene and hours had slipped by before he knew it. He roused himself when he noticed that the bow of the canoe had swung in towards a stretch of beach which gleamed white against the darkening woods, for the sun had gone down and there was a haze of rose which blended into purple upon the river.

"We camp here," explained Broken Nose gruffly.

The fat Indian laid his paddle, dripping, across the bow and kneeled there, impassively, as the canoe glided silently in to the shore. He stepped lightly out when the pebbles could be seen dimly underneath the water, and the canoe grated on the sand as he pulled it up on shore and steadied it while the others got out stiffly.

It was an ideal camping place, and evidently the guides had been there before, for there were bits of rubbish lying about and the remains of a former camp-fire, and the two men proceeded to pitch the tent and prepare supper with business-like speed.

Blake remembered that he was supposed to be ignorant of the bush and all its ways, so he contented himself with explorations of the shore until the meal was ready. After it was over they sat and smoked in silence while the shimmering river faded to a dull grayness and stars twinkled in the dark sky above the masses of whispering trees.

Next morning they were late in getting away. Broken Nose and the fat Indian struck camp in a most leisurely manner and displayed no haste when they were finally upon the river again. During the afternoon there was a portage of a few hundred yards, to avoid a fury of thundering rapids, but it appeared to occupy an interminable length of time.

When Blake saw the conduct of the others on the portage he began to have a suspicion that all was not well, for they made a great pother about the weight of the packs and the canoe, resting frequently, although Blake had often seen guides carry much heavier burdens without a murmur and with greater dispatch. Then, they rested a long while before taking to the river again, below the rapids, although they bore no evidences of excessive fatigue.

And, his supsicions once aroused, it came upon him with increasing clarity that the others were taking things easy, even delaying their progress, it seemed, and for no apparent purpose.

He was puzzled by this, but when Broken Nose swung the canoe into a shadowy cove before sundown and they pitched their tent for the night, he gave no sign that he considered this anything but an entirely reasonable proceeding, although they could well have paddled a good two hours longer.

But that night, as he lay in the tent and listened to the snores of his strange companions, he was oppressed by a feeling that there was more beneath their actions than a mere desire to make the journey in easy stages.

Both were experienced bushmen, that was evident, but they had traveled only a short distance that day, had dawdled at every turn and had left the river much earlier than necessary.

He could say nothing, he must not for a moment abandon his role of tenderfoot, but he could not shake off the uneasy feeling inspired by the silence, the complete, overwhelming silence of his guides.

Broken Nose was redolent of evil. In the calm stolidity of the fat Indian there was an ominous quality of danger. There was something most sinister, like the shadow of a gathering storm, about the pair, but their very silence cloaked them, for they had said nothing to indicate that there was anything amiss, and Blake was baffled.

He fell asleep, finally, to jumbled dreams in which Broken Nose flitted grimly and the pallid barkeep in Wigwam Falls murmured hoarsely:

"What a surprize! What a surprize!"

NEXT morning, although the sun shone clearly and the waters sparkled with the freshness of a young girl's laughter, Broken Nose and the fat Indian made no move to strike camp. When breakfast was over they smoked and stared out glumly over the water, like a pair of grotesque and graven images.

"When do we start?" asked Blake at last.

"Not today," replied Broken Nose almost genially. "John Turtle here says big t'understorm comin' up. Can't fool Injun."

Blake could have laughed aloud, although inwardly he was raging. A thunderstorm! There was no more sign of a thunderstorm in that sky than there was portent of a blizzard. The sky was as clear as a polished bowl. And, in any event, supposing a thunderstorm were approaching, so far off, why should they remain where they were until it arrived in its own good and distant time?

It would be but the work of a few minutes to take to the shore again and seek shelter should a storm come upon them, and they would at least be so much further on their journey.

Broken Nose observed Blake's involuntary expression of doubt.

"Injun can always tell," he said. "Knows signs—signs white man mebbe not see."

This, reflected Blake, was for the benefit of a supposed tenderfoot, although even a babe in arms would have refused to swallow this astounding fiction that John Turtle could predict a storm from such a flawless morning. Broken Nose evidently assumed that the factor's nephew would be filled to the brim with a copious supply of misinformation concerning the uncanny ways of the wilds and would be ready enough to credit the Indian with well-nigh occult powers of weather divination.

Blake, realizing this, feigned an air of vast astonishment and pretended to marvel greatly at John Turtle, the red man who could forecast the approach of a thunderstorm on a day as innocent of potentialities of storm as of volcanic eruptions.

The halfbreed went down the shore to fish. The Indian lay on his back and looked up at the sky. Plainly, his guides had no intention of proceeding further that day.

Blake roamed aimlessly up and down the shore all the morning and afternoon of that autumn day, which was perfect of its kind. Not a cloud showed in the sky from dawn to sunset.

He was furious. There was a force arrayed against him which he could not understand, a restraint so intangible that he could not bring the issue to a head. He could only wait meekly and play the part of the gullible tenderfoot.

"Well, it didn't rain," he ventured at supper that night beside the campfire.

"No," agreed Broken Nose calmly. "It didn't."

John Turtle's face was as blank as a tombstone, but he mumbled something to Broken Nose which made the halfbreed laugh quietly.

Next morning again dawned cool and clear, but the guides made no move to proceed down the river. They gave no explanation. After breakfast, John Turtle ambled lazily down the shore. Broken Nose sat on a rock in the bright sunlight and looked out over the river, darkly ominous, like an evil bird.

Blake was astounded. He went up to the halfbreed when he realized that the guides had no intention of starting.

"Look here," he demanded. "What's the matter? Why are you waiting?"

Broken Nose turned slowly, casually, from his perch on the rock and squinted down at him. His expression was wearily tolerant, a bit contemptuous. Indifferently he shrugged his shoulders, then, without deigning to reply, looked out over the river again.

With difficulty Blake retained his temper.

"Do we start today or do we not?"

The halfbreed, still gazing ahead, spoke softly—

"No."

"Why?"

The halfbreed did not answer.

"Am I to understand that I have to wait until you two are good and well ready to go on?"

No reply.

"What is the reason? There's no sense in it. You were sent to bring me to Deer Landing."

There was so little that he could say.

He had nothing definite. There was merely a passive, inexplicable resistance, with no seeming explanation. He was not a prisoner, yet he was not free. There had been no ill-will shown him by the guides, but there was no reason why ill-will should exist.

Broken Nose probably sensed his bewilderment, for a smile flickered about his cruel mouth for a moment and was gone. He spat into the water decisively.

Blake turned away and strode over to the canoe, drawn up on the shore. He would force a climax. The halfbreed watched him.

"If you men won't start, I'll go on alone. I won't be forced to wait here because of some whim. Are you coming?"

Broken Nose slouched down from the rock.

"Leave it alone!" he snarled sharply, as Blake bent to the canoe.

"Are you coming, then?"

"No!" Broken Nose was at his side, and he extended a clawlike hand and dragged the canoe farther up the beach. "Stay here."

This was a challenge.

Blake shoved himself roughly against the breed, pushing him to one side as he again seized the canoe, determined now to carry out his threat and proceed to Deer Landing alone. Then, swiftly, Broken Nose wound his long, sinewy arms about Blake, crushing him in an embrace of steel.

Blake was taken by surprize. His face was pressed against the halfbreed's thick sweater as he bent and struggled to free his arms, which were pinioned to his sides; he felt a sharp blow on one shin as Broken Nose attempted to kick him from his footing, and then, with brutal force, he jerked his head upwards, suddenly, viciously.

The crown of his head crashed full against the halfbreed's chin, and Blake heard his opponent's teeth snap together from the terrific impact; the strength of the imprisoning arms was lessened, and he wrenched himself free and leaped back.

Broken Nose was all but knocked out by that unexpected blow. He swayed a little, uncertainly, and then, as his head cleared again, he bared his yellow teeth in a gasp of ferocity and charged directly at Blake.

His attack was like that of an animal, he was lithe, incredibly strong as an animal, and he fought as an animal fights. He was upon Blake in an instant, and they went down on to the beach. For a few minutes there was a confusion of arms and legs and twisting bodies and flying sand, from which emanated gasps, grunts, oaths.

It was like grappling with a wildcat. Blake tried to keep cool under that amazing onslaught, under the blows, scratches, kicks, even bites, but there were no rules to this battle. It was furious, savage, and he could only fight back in kind.

There was an agonizing moment when the halfbreed wound long fingers in his hair and banged his head upon the beach, face downwards, but he shook himself free, choking and spitting, to double himself up and heave the human catamount over his shoulders, but Broken Nose, his swarthy face drawn with fury, squirmed back with surprizing swiftness and they were at it again in a second.

The speed, the cruel ferocity of the halfbreed, was overwhelming, and although Blake, too, was strong and had all the toughness and endurance of one who has lived a hard, clean life, he realized that the halfbreed was his master at this sort of rough-and-tumble battling. Broken Nose whirled swiftly over on his side as Blake jabbed savagely at his ribs, and as he did so his head was thrown back and his lean, brown throat was bared for an instant.

Blake saw his chance and, extending the knuckle of his forefinger out from his clenched fist, drove straight for the unprotected throat, all in the merest fraction of a second of that hurried, crowded fury of struggling.

It was a cruel trick, but he was fighting a cruel and dangerous antagonist; a look of agony crossed the halfbreed's face and he choked in pain.

Just as Blake saw victory within his grasp, just as Broken Nose fell back into the sand, a panting, human weight descended on Blake from behind, in a sudden attack which flung him forward against the halfbreed's body, and for a while there was more confusion of battling.

But now Blake was fighting two opponents instead of one, and at last he was overpowered and found himself lying flat on his back. A knee dug painfully into his chest, while the round, pock-marked face of John Turtle leered above him.

Broken Nose, cursing, seized Blake by the arms, and, bidding John Turtle get up, turned him over in the sand, although

Blake kicked and struggled anew, he was held firmly by the guides while his hands were tied securely behind his back.

Broken Nose had not emerged from the struggle unmarked. His sweater was torn, his hair was more than usually dishevelled, his nose was bleeding and he was plainly very angry as, assisted by the Indian, he lugged Blake into the tent and dumped him down upon the blankets.

BLAKE kept quiet. His wrists were tightly bound and there was nothing to be gained by further protests. He was a prisoner; he had been a prisoner all along. He did not know why, but he knew now, that for some reason, Broken Nose and John Turtle desired to see to it that he did not proceed farther up the river. There was mystery in it.

As he lay in the tent, listening to the voices of the two guides as they talked together on the riverbank, a few yards away, he wondered what possible motive they could have for their actions. Had they discovered the deception? It hardly seemed possible.

If they had found in Wigwam Falls that the real Treniff had left the town two days before, they would most assuredly have demanded some explanation from Blake. But they had accepted his claim calmly, without any apparent suspicion that all was not well.

It was clear to him that the prediction of rain the previous day had been merely a subterfuge for delay, that the others had quite definitely planned to hold him there, and had used force only as a last resort, when the supposed tenderfoot had refused to be fooled any more.

He puzzled over these things for a long while.

At noon John Turtle came into the tent with Blake's dinner, partridge shot just that morning. He looked dubiously at the prisoner's bonds and, after a consultation with Broken Nose, came back and untied them, keeping one end of the rope, however, knotted about Blake's left wrist, tying the other end of it securely about the tent pole, so that Blake remained as much a prisoner as before, but was enabled to move about more freely and ate his dinner without undue discomfort.

Blake endeavored to open up conversation with the Indian to find out why he was being kept there, but John Turtle either knew no English or was uncommonly stupid, for he merely frowned greasily and said nothing whatever. But something caught Blake's eye as the Indian bent over him while untying his wrists. It was the handle of a hunting knife, protruding from the red-skin's belt.

He had no chance to gain possession of the knife then, and it would have been an unwise move, for John Turtle would have doubtless discovered his loss during the afternoon, but until the Indian came back that evening with his supper, Blake's mind was filled with plans for escape. He had tried to loosen the knots of the rope which bound him, but it was impossible. The knife was his hope.

When John Turtle slouched into the tent with Blake's supper that evening he found the prisoner groaning. The Indian paused, surprized, and when Blake's groans continued he put down the tin pannikin and came over to him. Blake was lying on his side, turned away from the red-skin. John Turtle knelt down and shook him gently.

Blake groaned and turned to the Indian.

"I'm sick," he said.

John Turtle was puzzled. The white man had not been hurt in his fight with Broken Nose. He had eaten nothing except partridge for his dinner. There was no good reason why he should be sick, yet he was apparently in great pain. He leaned farther over to get a good look at the patient, who groaned most convincingly, and he did not see the free hand which crept stealthily toward his belt.

John Turtle grunted something in his own language and Blake groaned again. The knife slipped easily out of the belt. John Turtle, still puzzled, got up and went out to tell Broken Nose. The knife was hidden under Blake's body.

"Serve him right," came the halfbreed's voice, after John Turtle had explained.

This was plainly for Blake's benefit, and he grinned to himself as he cut loose with a few more agonizing groans and then settled himself to wait for nightfall.

He had at hand a means of escape and he was determined to take the canoe and go at the first opportunity. His own packsack was beside him, and it contained his rifle. Near-by there was a small pack, taken from the canoe, which he knew contained provisions of some kind. With these and his blankets he would have little to fear from the long river journey to Deer Landing. For the mystery surrounding the conduct of his guides rendered the adventure more intriguing. He was more than ever resolved to carry through his deception to the finish.

He waited, impatiently, while darkness gathered, and finally his captors came into the tent. He feigned sleep when they entered and they paid no attention to him, but rolled themselves in their blankets and were soon asleep.

He waited for a long time. The darkness was heavy, intense. Strange rustlings came from the bush. He could hear the waves lapping gently on the beach. An owl hooted, far out in the dark woods, and the echoes clamored interrogatively for long moments after.

When Blake was satisfied by the heavy breathing of the other men that they were sound asleep, he slowly reached beneath him for the knife, and then began to cut quietly at the rope. The knife was very sharp and it was only a few seconds before he was free.

He lay quietly again, but the guides did not move. Cautiously, Blake got to his feet and fumbled in the darkness for the two packs, and these he moved slowly over to the side of the tent. Then, raising the canvas slightly, he shoved the packs out into the darkness.

He waited again, but still the guides were undisturbed, so he roughly rolled up the blankets on which he was lying, then edged himself closer to the canvas, raised it again and rolled silently outside.

Quietly, very quietly, he got up and slung the packs over his shoulder, then picked his way carefully down toward the river.

There was a faint gleam from the beach, but the river was black before him, the darker mass of the opposite shore rising into the night, merging imperceptibly with the sky above. He saw the canoe, like a shadow, drawn up on the shore and so, feeling his way, he deposited the packs and the blankets in it, then felt to make sure that there was a paddle in the stern.

He knew that he could not hope to launch the canoe without some noise so he acted swiftly. As he shoved the light craft out into the water it grated sharply, thunderously it seemed to him, on the pebbles, but he leaped into the stern, seized the paddle and swung the canoe out into the river before the echoes had ceased their sudden crashing amid the trees.

There was a faint sound from the tent, which was a gray blur against the blackness of the forest and the night, and then a voice. He bent desperately to the paddle, with short, powerful strokes which sent the canoe scudding through the water, and then he heard a shout, followed by a thudding of feet.

He glanced back for an instant and, even as he looked, there was a spatter of red flame in the gloom and a rifle cracked sharply. A splash as a bullet *plupped* into the water far over to his left, told him that the shot was wide, and although the rifle cracked twice again, the echoes of the shots crowding close upon each other and disturbing the oppressive silence of the wilderness to a jangling uproar of sound, to a fury of reverberations like the coughing of many giants in the night, Blake had no fear.

There was elation in his heart for he was free again and on his way down the dark river to fulfil his promise to Treniff. The black stream was as unknown to him and as fraught with mystery and danger as the events which lay before him.

IT WAS the morning of Blake's fourth day after his escape from Broken Nose and John Turtle. The mists were slow in rising from the river. He judged that he was near Deer Landing, for there had been evidences along the riverbank the previous day which told him that he was approaching a settlement of some kind, but so heavy was the river fog this morning that he could see nothing.

Even the high trees on either side of the broad stream were blotted out by the thick, drifting whiteness; it almost obscured the bow of his canoe. The mist hung low, it was a cold, damp morning and he felt chilled, although he had had breakfast but an hour before.

He paddled very carefully through the mist. It was like floating in the clouds, but he had little eye for the eery beauty of it. He wished the fog would lift, for he feared snags or rocks in the river, and he peered into the smoky haze ahead as the canoe slipped quietly along with the current.

A flittering blur close by arrested his

attention. It disappeared, and then reappeared. It was low on the water, vague, indistinguishable, but in outline it resembled a canoe, he thought. He shouted.

"Hallo-o-o!"

The fog deadened the echoes. Then, out of the mists, came an answering hail.

"Ho!"

He started. It was the first human voice he had heard in over three days. The blur in the mists appeared faintly again.

"Am I near Deer Landing?" he shouted.

Again the mysterious voice.

"Yes. Who are you?"

The voice was thick and far away, and floated through the fog in tones barely distinguishable.

"I'm Treniff," he shouted back.

Silence. White, shrouding, omnipotent silence.

"Will you guide me in?" he called.

There was no answer. The blur in the fog had disappeared, erased in an instant.

He was puzzled. Why had there been no answer? There was nothing but blank mist and a small patch of limpid water visible about him; there was no sign or sound of any other presence. It was almost as if he had imagined the entire encounter.

Then, with a sudden shock, something which came gliding swiftly out of the fog behind him, struck the stern of the canoe. He was thrown off his balance by the impact, the canoe quivered and teetered and, as he had a startled glimpse of another canoe, vanishing quickly, like a ghostly craft, into the whiteness, one shadowy figure in the stern, his own craft, which had swung far over, tipped completely and he was thrown into the water.

The current was swift at this point and, although he reached out to grasp the canoe, he had been thrown so far clear and the current had swept it so far away in that short space of time, that he saw there was no hope of regaining it, so he struck out in the direction of the shore.

He swam slowly, conserving his energies as much as possible, letting the current carry him downstream, but all the time forging gradually in toward the bank.

The water was very cold and his clothing dragged at his body. Fortunately he had not worn his heavy boots while in the canoe, preferring to remain in sock-feet while paddling on a strange and treacherous river, but even so, he found himself tiring in a short while and the looming shadow of the shoreland was very faint. The current was stronger than he had thought and his progress to the shore was slow.

He swam mechanically, utterly bewildered by the unexpected turn in events.

Who had been the man in the canoe? Why had he made this sudden attack? For it had been quite evidently an attack. Had it been accidental, the canoeist would undoubtedly have tried to rescue Blake, but instead he had vanished as swiftly and mysteriously as he had appeared.

He had used English in answering Blake's shouts, but the fog had so obscured his tones and he had said so little that Blake could not determine whether he was red man or white. He knew that many of the Indians and halfbreeds around a trading-post speak passable English. But why the attack?

Coming on the heels of the attempt of Broken Nose and John Turtle to hinder his progress to Deer Landing, this amazing reception took on an added tinge of mystery. Plainly, in assuming the name of George Treniff, nephew of the factor, he had assumed a great deal of trouble which had been lying in wait for that young man as well.

Hitherto, the fog had been fraught with unfathomable silence but now, as he swam doggedly on toward the bank, feeling the tug and pull of the current, he heard a sound which awakened alarm in his heart. It was a far-off rushing sound, a rushing and splashing, dominated by a dull roar, still a long way off, but he knew it for the rushing and splashing of rapids, ending in the dull roar of a waterfall.

He bent all his strength to swimming directly toward the bank. The placid smoothness of the water was ruffled now and he found that the current was stronger. It held him in an irresistible grip, and the roaring down the river grew in volume.

It was touch and go. The land loomed more clearly ahead, and he saw that there was a rocky beach which rose abruptly farther down the river to a sheer cliff, jutting high out of the water and vanishing into the morning mists above. If he were swept past the beach he would be lost, for he saw that he could secure no hold on that smooth wall of rock directly overhanging the rapids.

He flung all his strength into long, forceful strokes. Out of a corner of his eye he could see jagged rocks looming out of the river and dancing, foaming water. Then, although the current had a remorseless, urging grasp, he kicked himself free of it, just as the high wall of rock crept slowly up to meet him. His feet touched bottom and he staggered into shallow water and stumbled in to the rocks of the shore and fell there, exhausted.

HALF an hour later, Blake came down a beaten portage trail to Deer Landing. His clothes were dripping, he was still tired from his struggle with the river, and he advanced with caution, for the dangers through which he had passed prepared him for anything in the way of surprizes at the trading post.

The trail led around back of the cliff which overlooked the rapids and when he came out upon a little hillside he could see the smooth, flat river below the tumbling waste of water from which he had so narrowly escaped. There were still shreds of mist rising from the river below the falls. It was a dull morning with a hint of rain in the damp air.

Deer Landing lay beneath him. He was overcome by the unprepossessing appearance of the place.

There was a low, rambling building, once painted white, which dominated an extensive clearing on the sloping shore. About this building were a few huts in varying degrees of dilapidation. There was a picket fence and an untidy garden around the post, a flagpole on which hung limply a tattered Union Jack.

Around one of the squalid huts a few Indian children were playing. There was none of the spick-and-span cleanliness which he had had heard characterized many trading posts; this place had a run-down air, the appearance of a place where nothing seems to matter any more.

The sandy beach was littered with refuse, old boxes and tin cans. The windows of the trading-post were like somber eyes, staring disconsolately upon the vestiges of a former grandeur.

He walked slowly down the path and, as he drew near, there was a yelping of dogs and half a dozen mongrels rushed out from the huts, followed immediately by some dirty, dark-eyed children, who promptly flung sticks and stones to drive the animals away.

Then they stared at Blake in mingled astonishment and terror. A white man, whom they had never seen before, emerging dripping from the bush, bootless, hatless, without packsack or rifle—it was incredible.

No others appeared, although Blake was conscious of a brown face which appeared to stare briefly from a window of one of the huts, so he advanced toward the rambling, white building.

As he stepped up onto the broad veranda the door was flung quickly open and a slight, gray-haired man, with cold, blue eyes and a wispy mustache, stood there looking at him, in utmost surprize.

"Surely," he said quickly, his eyes widening. "Surely you're not George?"

Blake nodded, extending his hand.

"And you are my uncle?"

The other shook hands as if in a dream, all the while murmuring:

"Well, well, well—but how did this happen? You're all wet, my boy. Where are the guides?"

"If you'll let me have a change of clothing first, I'll tell you all about it, uncle," laughed Blake, as he went inside. "It's a bit cold to be standing about like this."

"Of course, of course," replied Mainwaring.

Fussily, he ushered Blake down a dark hall to a small room which overlooked the river. He had queer, birdlike motions, and he minced along ahead of Blake in a nervous, spasmodic way, all the time chirping his surprize and curiosity at Blake's sudden arrival and present plight.

He was short and very slight of build and he gave an impression of tremendous and futile agitation; when he flung open the door of Blake's room it was with a flourish that would have been imposing from a bigger man but was ridiculous from him.

"Your room, George," he announced in as near an approach to the grand manner as his diminutive appearance and high-pitched voice would allow. "I'll send a boy in with some clothes for you in a moment. We have plenty. Yours are dripping. You went into the river, I suppose, but I'll let you tell it. You must hurry. I'm anxious to hear about this."

He half-closed the door, then turned and peeped back in again, nervously stroking his little mustache.

"By the way," he piped, hesitating a bit.

"Would you mind? Are the guides all right?"

"So far as I know, they are."

"Ah." He peered brightly at Blake for a moment, then chuckled to himself. "That makes me all the more curious. But I can wait. I can wait. Your clothes will be along in a moment."

He closed the door gently.

HALF an hour later Blake, duly clad in dry garments a trifle too small for him, feeling fresher for a shave, for hot water and a shaving set had been sent to him with Mainwaring's compliments, came into the factor's private office.

It was a snug little room with high windows, heavily curtained, on two sides, and there was a stone fireplace in which crackled a cheerful blaze. On the wall, back of the factor's desk, was a crest—the Mainwaring crest, Blake assumed—and near it was a small picture, neatly framed, a water color of a great mansion, almost hidden by trees. A gaudy picture of the royal family, evidently once part of a calendar, hung near by, under a small, silken flag. The office itself was sparsely furnished, the big desk and two crude chairs dominating the room, while an Indian rug lent a bright note of color.

Mainwaring sat at his desk, writing. He wrote with the same nervous uncertainty that characterized all his movements and, as Blake looked at him for a moment, sitting in the light from the high windows, he was struck by the anxious, high-strung attitude of the man. He was odd. He seemed oppressed by a sense of inadequacy.

"Well, well," he said cheerfully enough, putting down the pen and rubbing his hands. "How do the clothes fit? A bit small? Are they? Did you shave?"

He had a way of rattling off questions without waiting for answers, that was most disconcerting at first.

"Of course you shaved. Always shave when you're out in the backwoods, my boy, if you can. Especially in a place like this. When a man gets to the point where he doesn't care whether he shaves or not, he is beginning to lose a little of his self-respect. And that's bad, especially up here. We find that."

Blake sat down.

"But tell me," continued Mainwaring eagerly. "Tell me about your trip. What happened? Did you upset? Where are the guides? Were they drowned? Tell me the whole story."

Blake leaned back in the chair and recounted the events of the previous days. He told of the attack on him by Broken Nose—the factor interrupted to tell him that the halfbreed's real name was La Tuque—and of his escape from the guides. Mainwaring punctuated the narrative frequently with chirping ejaculations; "Well, well!" "By Jove!" "You don't say!" constantly snapping his bony fingers in nervous excitement.

When Blake told of the mysterious canoeist who had come upon him in the fog, he jumped up from his chair and paced back and forth in the narrow area between the window and his desk, tugging at his weak mustache, muttering impatiently to himself.

"But this—this is astounding!" he exclaimed, when Blake had finished. "It's the most remarkable thing—most remarkable. Why, it's almost unbelievable!"

"It's the truth."

"Oh, not that I doubt your word, George," said Mainwaring quickly. "Not for one moment. But it's such an unusual story. To think that La Tuque and John Turtle would do that! Why they're two of my best guides. There's something underneath this. And then this amazing upset you had this morning. That's the crowning touch. Right at Deer Landing, too! Why man, you might have been drowned."

"It was narrow enough, at that."

"I should say so. You might have been swept into Deer Rapids. You'd never have come out alive."

Mainwaring was greatly disturbed. He blinked rapidly, and his slight body, in the baggy, gray suit he wore, seemed charged with an electric vitality.

"Have you an idea at all?" he asked. "Do you know whether it was a white man or an Indian? Didn't you get a glimpse of this fellow in the canoe?"

"Not a look."

"It's unfortunate. Most unfortunate."

Mainwaring drummed his fingers on the desk before him.

"You see—" he hesitated again—"when you say this man spoke English—there are only two white men at the post just now. Grange and myself. Grange is the assistant. Of course, once in a while trappers pass up and down the river, and it's possible, barely possible, that this may have been one of them. But why should any one do a thing like that? You say you think it was deliberate. Some of the Indians, of course, speak a little English."

"I couldn't be positive. It may have been an Indian, for all I know."

"It's very strange. The motive——"

Mainwaring sat down at the desk again.

"You've no idea," he said, looking over at Blake, and his face seemed very old and careworn and harassed, "you've no idea how this shakes me up, George. Especially about the guides. I'd have trusted them anywhere, but there must be something underneath it. They were sent down from here to pick you up at Wigwam Falls. They seemed to take it as an ordinary piece of business. There was no reason— I'll have to be on my guard."

Locking the stable door after the horse was stolen, thought Blake. The factor would have little need to be on his guard now; for he was convinced that John Turtle and Broken Nose—the factor, he noticed, called him La Tuque—would never appear at the post again. It would be ridiculous of them to come back to Deer Landing after the manner in which they had treated the factor's guest.

However, had Blake known that the guides were even then devising ways and means of reaching the post and had he known the burning malice which consumed La Tuque, the halfbreed, just then, he would perhaps not have been so easy in his mind.

"Has there been any previous trouble?" asked Blake idly.

"Well, yes and no. Nothing, you see, that I could lay my finger on. Just a suspicion. Things haven't been running as smoothly as they should. A man in my position, you'll understand—he must be very careful. There's jealousy and envy."

His voice trailed away weakly, and he looked out the window, out across the untidy little garden, strewn with dead potato stalks, across the unkempt beach, across the smooth river to the dense, implacable forest in the background.

"If you don't mind," he said, abruptly, turning to face Blake again. "I wouldn't mention anything of this around the post. Especially to Grange. He's my assistant. Oh, yes, I told you that. A good fellow, of course, but if you say nothing of this to him, it might help. You understand?"

"I understand," replied Blake evenly.

He thought he grasped the situation. Grange was the only other white man at the post. The factor was forced to suspect that his assistant might have had something to do with Blake's surprizing reception on the river. Mainwaring was quite evidently troubled and perplexed. Perhaps Grange was an old employee at the post and the factor disliked to believe ill of the man. He had perhaps dropped a real hint of the trouble when he mentioned jealousy and envy.

Obviously by an effort, Mainwaring threw off the air of worried depression which had overcome him and forced himself to become genial and friendly.

"But this is a poor way to welcome my nephew," he said. "You'll excuse me? These things are upsetting. I haven't asked about home yet. It's been a long while since I last saw you, hasn't it? You were only a baby then."

"It's been a long time."

"Yes, a long time. There have been many changes. Your mother—she is well, I hope?"

"Quite as usual, when I saw her last," said Blake with perfect truth, for that matter.

"She writes regularly," said Mainwaring. "Poor girl. I've been sorry for her."

"She appreciates, we both appreciate, what you've done."

Mainwaring waved it away.

"Shhh!" he derided. "Don't speak of it. The least I could do." He looked at Blake, approvingly. "I'm glad. You've turned out well. But then—" as if fearing he were on the verge of sentimentality—"it is a pleasure to receive your mother's letters. I'm buried up here, you see. The letters and papers she sends, they mean a lot. They bring a little of England up here into the wilderness."

He looked about the office.

"I try, of course," he said. "There are a few reminders."

He motioned to the crest and Blake nodded with understanding. Mainwaring indicated the water color on the wall and Blake, on an impulse, walked over to it.

"The castle," he said.

"Yes, the castle," observed Mainwaring,

staring at his desk. "There have been a great many changes."

He did not seem anxious to discuss the family fortunes, and Blake was relieved, for he did not care to be led into deep water on this precarious topic.

Strange to say, he was a trifle disappointed in Mainwaring. He had been expecting possibly a dignified old aristocrat, living in the style of a feudal baron, perhaps a fire-eating old jingo, but this birdlike little man with his nervous chattering and excitable ways, was more like a shop-keeper than a scion of an ancient family. There was about him an air faintly plebian, as if long years of dealing in furs and living apart from the outer world had dulled the veneer of his patrimony and had left only the symbols of his former high estate.

The crest, the flag, these seemed pitifully out of place. One imagined Mainwaring realized he had slipped far away from what they had once meant to him, but still clung to them to convince himself that his breeding had, after all, withstood the tests of a strange land and a hermitic existence.

"We'll stroll around the post," said Mainwaring, getting up. "There is not a great deal to show you, I'm afraid, but such as it is, perhaps you'll be interested. It's all very new to you, I suppose."

"Quite."

"Oh, well. It's become a little dull to me, I can tell you. Although there's a fascination. One grows into it. There are times when I'm so tired of this place I never want to see it any more, but I know I'd never willingly leave it. For in twenty years, it's become home, you understand, as much home to me as London is to you, no doubt. Living up here has its compensations, and the work is interesting enough. But the company——"

He checked himself, as if he had been on the verge of saying something indiscreet and lapsed into silence as he led Blake out on to the veranda and down the path.

* * *

"THESE are Indian huts," he resumed, pointing to the hovels near by. "The Indians have all gone down the river by now. They bring their furs in during the spring, you see, hang around here all summer and go back in the fall. They're lazy, shiftless fellows, mostly, but one comes to like them. Yet you have to watch them. You have to watch them."

He minced along beside Blake, pointing out the huts with his queer, quick gestures. There was little enough to see. The trading post was in a small clearing, and a heavy growth of forest rose abruptly from a tangle of small bushes, in a high, semicircular wall, grim, impassive, a wall which looked as though it might at any moment crowd in and overwhelm the clearing, with its rambling white building and the untidy little huts.

"Aren't there any Indians around?" inquired Blake. "I saw some children——"

Mainwaring stopped and grasped him by the arm.

"I forgot to tell you," he said. "You'll be meeting Grange. The assistant. These are his children. Perhaps you've heard of what we call squaw men?"

"Oh, yes."

"Over in England, of course—well, people of our station look on that a bit different to what we do in Canada. Grange is a good fellow, a good worker, but he let this country get him. The loneliness and everything. He slipped. Remember what I told you about shaving every morning. He didn't care. He took a squaw. He drinks a lot. He's hardly a man. A complete change from what he was. I think he's been trying to drink himself to death. You know the kind. But he isn't very successful at it. Liquor isn't so easy to get, and then, it's remarkable what that fellow can stand. Really remarkable!"

"The company says nothing?"

"Oh, no. It's not uncommon. He's a good worker, of course. He knows the fur game. I'll say that for him. He does know the fur game. But he's not a pleasant fellow—overbearing, you know—sullen."

A trace of bitterness crept into Mainwaring's voice. It was not snobbishness, for Blake saw that he considered Grange's manner of living not wholly reprehensible, but he sensed a faint enmity, a petty dislike of the assistant, and he wondered at it. But Blake knew that it is an irony of the wilderness that it separates and embitters most the very men who have greatest need of friendship and companionship in their common isolation.

"You needn't mention it, of course," went on Mainwaring, "but you won't show any surprize when you meet Grange. About the way he lives, I mean. It may be a bit shocking to you, since you're not used to it, but don't let on you notice anything out of the way. He might feel hurt."

Blake reflected that if Mainwaring knew how little he was shocked now by anything untoward he saw in the lives of men, he would be vastly astonished, but he gravely assured the factor that he would not for the world injure Mr. Grange's feelings, and they paused outside one of the little huts.

"Grange," called Mainwaring.

The door of the hut opened, and a lanky, oldish man came slowly out. Blake had a glimpse of a fat, slovenly squaw moving about in the dim interior of the hut, and then the door closed and he was confronting the assistant, who extended a long, rough hand, as Mainwaring curtly introduced them.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr.— Treniff," said Grange, hesitating slightly over the name.

His tones were of such calmness and gentleness, in such contrast to his shiftless, hard-bitten, grizzled appearance, that Blake was startled by the incongruity.

Grange, carelessly and untidily clad in a torn shirt and trousers, with old moccasins on his feet, was a queer mixture of strength and weakness. His breath was strong with liquor; his eyes were red-rimmed; his mustache was scraggly and tobacco-stained; his hair was unkempt; his clothing was dirty and ill cared for.

He was doubtless about the same age as Mainwaring, but looked older; he was not prepossessing, but there was something likable about him, perhaps it was the lazy kindliness of his expression, as if he realized the depth to which he had gone, yet found something richly humorous in it, as if he had a jest upon all the world, a jest of which he alone knew the point, and in his kindly look one sensed that he was not what he was because of any evil that was in him, but because of external forces which had been overwhelming.

In a flash it came over Blake—what this man must have passed through in his time! Long, dull years in a hard and lonely country, hardships and dangers, and he, no doubt a convivial and gregarious soul, had gradually succumbed to the forces about him, had weakened in the fight. His spirit had been broken by the wilderness and the invisible terrors of its brooding silence. A squaw man, drowning his disappointments and loneliness in liquor, expressing his contempt for the world which he had lost, by a sodden apathy to the finer things that world had once represented.

These things passed through Blake's mind as he shook hands with Grange and made the usual banal remarks reserved for such occasions.

"Will you be with us long?" inquired the assistant mildly.

"Merely a few days, I'm afraid."

Blake was not taken with Deer Landing. He had resolved to leave as soon as it was decently possible.

"Nonsense!" broke in Mainwaring. "A few weeks, you mean. You'll leave when we're ready to let you go, my boy," and he slapped Blake upon the back, vigorously.

Blake disliked that slap, although he smiled, for it lacked an impulsive sincerity, it seemed cold and studied, and there was a hidden quality to Mainwaring's words which he could not understand.

"I hope you enjoy your stay," said Grange, and then turned toward the door again. "I shall see you again, Mr. Treniff. Any time—if you could care to visit my humble mansion." He smiled slowly, apologetically. "You are quite welcome, you know."

"Thank you. I'd be very glad," replied Blake, and when Grange had returned to the shack he walked back to the post with Mainwaring, who was oddly silent all the way.

DINNER was served shortly afterward by the squaw cook. At the table, Mainwaring was his birdlike self again, and twittered cheerfully on many topics. He asked eagerly for anything Blake could tell him of the outer world, particularly of Montreal, and he hung on Blake's words.

"Ah! There's a city for you! There's a city!" he said when Blake gave a fictitious account of his arrival in Montreal. "I'd like to get out of here again for a little while and go down there. Just for a change. Can you believe it, I've only been away from this post half a dozen times in twenty years. Just to get into a city again. Lights, theaters, wine, restaurants, women."

Blake suppressed an impulse to smile. The little man was the most unworldly looking creature imaginable. But then, perhaps all the worldliness had not been crushed out of him by the wilderness, perhaps a feeble spark of it still remained.

The factor chirped on about England, deplored briefly the low ebb of the family fortunes, and then dilated upon the rascality of a company that sent a man up into a forgotten and savage land and left him there to make money for them until he died.

"Upon my word," he said, "I'm sorry for that fellow Grange. I'm sorry for him. Works here for twenty years—as long as I have. And what does he get? One wretched raise in pay a few years ago! And what good does it do him? Where can he spend his money? And it's little enough to spend. Perhaps he gets leave for a few weeks every two years and gets as far as Wigwam Falls and goes on a big drunk. Or perhaps he gets down to the city.

"I tell you, after a man has lived up here so long he's afraid of the city. Afraid of it! He usually ends up by having a miserable time, for he has forgotten how to play, and comes back to the post before his leave is up. There's no change, no chance of promotion. A man slaves for years and when a good berth opens up at another post, somebody with influence gets it. It isn't fair. Can you imagine a man working for twenty years without promotion? It's enough to drive a man to drink."

He slumped sullenly down in his chair and tapped the edge of his plate with a spoon. Blake was astonished to see that the little man had become very angry. He was quivering with emotion; his face had a choleric flush. He seemed to take Grange's grievances to heart as if they were his own.

"They bury a man up here and forget about him. Forget about him as long as the post shows a profit. Once in a while an inspector comes around." He checked himself sharply, and his face lighted up. "Ah, yes. The inspector! The inspector!"

He bit at his mustache, thoughtfully, and then went on, his voice rising.

"But if the post doesn't show a profit, they remember him then. Oh, yes! But the rest of the time he might as well be dead so far as they're concerned, and he might as well be dead so far as he's concerned too, for that matter. It's a dog's life, I tell you. A dog's life!"

The man was dangerously near a breakdown, thought Blake. His voice was unnatural, his actions were abnormal. He looked very frail and frightened, as if the grim loneliness of the bush had oppressed him to the point of distraction, and Blake felt sorry for him, sitting there, his thin face twisted with impotent anger, as he tapped the edge of the plate with his spoon.

FOR the next week, Blake idled about Deer Landing. He hunted a little, timidly, as a tenderfoot would hunt, and displayed a proper ignorance of firearms; he paddled about the river, displaying the requisite amount of awkwardness with a paddle; he read the few dog-eared novels of a past generation, which were in Mainwaring's library, and otherwise amused himself, but there was little enough to do.

The atmosphere of the place was far from cheering, and the weather did not tend to lessen the depression. The skies were dark and overcast; chill winds came from the north. The dull, gray light of each succeeding day only emphasized the sordid untidiness, the drab ugliness of the post.

And always there was that brooding sense of cruel power, amounting almost to a tangible presence, about the surrounding forest; always there was an ominous, deadly beauty in the unchanging river.

Mainwaring spoke very little, although there were no outbursts similar to that which had marked his first meal with Blake, and in which the terrified, unbalanced mind of the lonely man had been laid bare. He referred occasionally to the events preceding Blake's arrival, and he cursed Broken Nose and John Turtle profusely, but no solution to those mysteries was forthcoming, and eventually the matter was dropped.

The factor was courteous in a preoccupied, absent-minded sort of way, but he brooded for long hours in his office. Two or three times Blake saw him standing out upon the steep rock which overlooked Deer Rapids, and from which one could look up and down the river for a long distance. He would gaze down the wide stream, which wound about and vanished in the trees as if absorbed by the illimitable forest, and each time he would come back slowly, muttering to himself, shaking his head, as if he had been watching for some one who had not arrived.

Blake saw Grange frequently, and found

the shiftless assistant good company. Grange was quiet and reserved, he had evidently been a good man in his day, he had evidence of refinement beneath his surface uncouthness. He had periods of extreme moodiness, alternated with times of high spirits, when the squalor of his surroundings and his present manner of living seemed to matter not at all. It was as if he even found a sort of pagan enjoyment in his degradation.

He was frankly interested in Blake, and asked him many questions about the outside world, without seeming to pry into his personal affairs. Hewas an Englishman, it appeared. He had arrived at Deer Landing but a year after Mainwaring, and he had been there ever since.

Of his life previous to that time he would say nothing. So Blake, remembering the outline of his conversation with Treniff, fortified by his own considerable knowledge of England, talked to the assistant much as he had talked to the factor, and, in his opinion, played the part of the nephew quite passably.

There was no hiding the fact that Grange was a broken and dispirited man, a victim of the wilderness. He was like a man who has been imprisoned for a long time, and has lost all hope of release, all desire for freedom, a man whose fiber had been weakened by solitude and monotony. For this little clearing in the heart of a silent and brooding land was as much a prison as any stone-walled penitentiary, as deadly in its routine, as crushing in its isolation.

Blake had a certain sympathy for the assistant and liked him, a fact which gave Grange evident pleasure but which, on the other hand, brought no approval from Mainwaring.

"Be careful, boy," he advised one evening at supper. "Don't be getting too confidential with him. He's all right, of course, but he doesn't like me. I know him. I know him too well."

He checked himself. The factor had a way of seeming to be constantly on the brink of indiscreet revelations. Blake was surprized. There was real hatred in Mainwaring's voice, even a frantic bitterness, ill-concealed.

It was strange that the wilderness should have raised such an invisible and deadly barrier between these two men, working side by side, enduring the same hardships, sharing the same pleasures, for a score of lonely years.

He did not wonder at it, altogether. He did not wonder that Grange was a sodden wreck and Mainwaring almost a madman. Solitude and brooding silence hung over Deer Landing like a cloud, unhealthy and malignant. He disliked the place intensely.

"I think I've stayed long enough, uncle," he announced next morning at breakfast.

"What? What's that? Going away?" Mainwaring looked up sharply from his bacon. "No—no—no! You can't go yet."

"But really, I'll have to," insisted Blake. "I was only to stay a few days, you know. You pointed that out in your letter."

"Yes, yes. So I did," said Mainwaring quickly. "But that doesn't matter. You'll have to stay a few days longer. You really must. I won't hear of you going away now."

Blake made a few feeble objections, but they were quickly overruled. The factor was insistent that Blake prolong his visit. He was firm. His manner was almost commanding and Blake, although he was bored by the trading post, although he disliked the depressing atmosphere of the place, the tension which prevailed between Grange and Mainwaring, gave in with as good a grace as possible.

But two days later, as he met the factor returning from the rock above Deer Rapids—the journey to the rock had become part of Mainwaring's morning routine—he told him that he must return to Wigwam Falls next day. Mainwaring was greatly agitated.

"But I can't let you go," he insisted. "I want you to stay with me a little while longer. Just a few more days. Please, George. Just a day or so more. If you're not enjoying yourself——"

"Oh, no. It isn't that at all," said Blake. "I don't want you to think I don't appreciate your hospitality, but I must go back soon. You know, it was understood I was only to be here a week. There are certain things I must attend to."

"I know. I know. I'm sorry," twittered Mainwaring nervously. "But you'll have to stay here a day or so longer in any case, until I can get you a guide. I can't very well spare Grange, you see, and with those two villains gone who went up the river for you, it's a bit difficult. But I'll go down the river this very afternoon. There's an Indian I can get."

He left Blake and hastened up to the trading post.

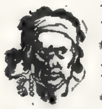
The factor did not go down the river for the Indian that afternoon. He locked himself in his office and did not come out to supper.

Blake wondered at Mainwaring's desperate anxiety for him to remain at the post. He wondered at the factor's journeys to the rock above the rapids. Was he expecting any one? Was there any association? He began to feel that there was more than hospitality behind the factor's insistence that he stay a few days longer.

In a way, he was powerless to leave, for he could not admit that he was enough of a bushman to go to Wigwam Falls alone. He dared not start without a guide unless he wished all his pretenses of being a tenderfoot to come crashing about his ears.

There was something uncanny about the trading post. He had sensed it from the beginning. There was something inexpressibly strange about his entire visit, something unnatural about Mainwaring, something odd about Grange. He could not put it down entirely to the personalities of the two men, altered as they were from ordinary courses by their solitary existences. It had to do with himself.

He was convinced that neither had discovered his deception, that both implicitly believed him to be the factor's nephew, but in all the unexplained incidents of his journey to the post, in all the eventless course of his stay, there was a pervading thread of mystery, without apparent reason.



BROKEN NOSE and John Turtle came to Deer Landing next morning. Blake, standing on the veranda, saw three men emerging from the bush, toiling down the portage trail from above the rapids. One was bowed under the weight of a canoe balanced on his shoulders. It looked as if the canoe had miraculously grown legs and was swaying down the trail like an ungainly monster. The others, who were laden with packs, he recognized at once as his erstwhile guides.

They spoke not a word to one another. When they neared the post, Broken Nose and John Turtle left the course of their leader, who was bound for the river with the canoe, and came up to the veranda, where they flung down their packs.

Sweat gleamed on their swarthy faces. The Indians stared curiously at Blake, but neither spoke to him, nor he to them. They trudged on into the building, although in passing, Broken Nose shot a look of such utter malignance, such smoldering hatred, at Blake, that he felt perturbed in spite of himself.

The door closed behind them and, shortly afterward, as Blake idly watched the remaining member of the trio leave the canoe upon the shore and come up toward the post, there arose a violent uproar from the factor's office.

The windows were closed, but the high pitched voice of Mainwaring could be heard, spasmodically. Fragments of vituperation drifted out to Blake:

"Fools—utter fools—should have known—why did you?—can I not depend on you?" interspersed with an unintelligible grumbling from the halfbreed.

The guides were evidently enduring a severe lecture for their conduct. Blake wondered that they had returned to the post at all. At any rate, he reflected, Mainwaring would probably be able to find out from them the motives underlying their actions and that much of the mystery, at least, would be made clear.

He glanced at the man who was coming up from the river. He was a stocky, broad-shouldered fellow, quite ordinary in appearance, but there was something familiar about him and, suddenly, Blake started. He recognized the newcomer as a trapper named Latreille, whom he had met in Wigwam Falls. Latreille, on his way back to his traplines, had doubtless picked up the two guides.

The trapper recognized him at the same instant, and he gaped in astonishment.

"*Bon jour*, Meester Blake," he greeted warmly. "W'at a place to find you in."

Blake stepped forward quickly, shaking his head for silence, and the trapper stopped, his eyes very wide.

"Don't let on you recognize me," urged Blake in a low voice. "I'll tell you why, later. But I'm a stranger to you, remember."

Latreille was no fool. He nodded slightly, and in his eyes Blake saw a warning look. He turned and beheld Mainwaring standing in the doorway.

If he had overheard, the factor gave no sign of it.

"*Bon jour*—" began the trapper as he spied him.

"Come in, Mr. Latreille. Come right in," said Mainwaring, very loudly and rapidly. His thin face was drawn and anxious. "The guides have been telling me how you picked them up. Come into the office."

He ignored Blake and advanced to the trapper, whom he grasped affectionately by the arm and almost hustled across the veranda.

"It's been a long time since you've been here. A long time——"

The door banged noisily.

Had Mainwaring heard the trapper's greeting? Blake wondered. He did not know how long the factor had been standing in the doorway. It could only have been an instant. But there was something wrong. Mainwaring's reception of Latreille had been so hurried, he had spoken so loudly, that it was evident he was laboring under great excitement.

At that moment, Grange came around the corner of the veranda.

"I see the guides are back," he remarked.

"Yes, they're back."

"I had been wondering where they were. Mr. Mainwaring did not say——"

The assistant was angling for information, but Blake did not enlighten him.

"I imagine they were sent on a trip the morning I arrived," he said, as casually as he could.

"Possibly."

There was the faintest inflection of skepticism in the assistant's voice, and Blake felt uncomfortable, realizing that the man did not believe him, but was too courteous to express an open doubt.

Grange seemed on the point of saying something more. He idled about for a moment or so, scratched his stubbled chin meditatively, but then shambled away to his shack, without another word.

Latreille came out a short while later, accompanied by Mainwaring, and for the next half hour there was considerable bustling to and fro, as the trapper wanted supplies. Broken Nose and the Indian did not appear, and Grange was summoned to help.

Mainwaring was intensely active, chirruping constantly, but Blake noticed that he kept close by Latreille and although he wanted to have a word or so alone with the trapper, there was no opportunity for that. Grange worked silently away, but Mainwaring did very little to help, although he gave an impression of being tremendously busy.

Once, as Latreille passed by Blake, when the factor was bent over a pack which he was stowing in the canoe, his lips moved, and he whispered, without a change of expression, "You bettaire watch out, m'sieu," and then went on with his preparations.

The incident was not noticed by Mainwaring. Blake was puzzled. Why had the trapper given him this warning? He tried to edge Latreille over to one side, but Mainwaring was too alert for that, and stayed close by the trapper until he finally shoved his canoe clear of the shore and paddled down the river.

The factor was silent as they walked back up to the post. He went into his office and did not appear for dinner. Blake did not, in fact, see him all that afternoon. He saw John Turtle ambling about, but Broken Nose was not in evidence.

There were voices from the factor's office, however.

MAINWARING came out to supper that evening. He was chewing at his mustache, always a sign that he was nervous and perturbed, as he came in and he regarded Blake silently, speculatively. For over half the meal he said not a word, and Blake held his peace. He was not sure of his ground. He could not dismiss a conviction that Mainwaring had overheard Latreille that morning, had at least heard enough to rouse his suspicions.

"The inspector should be here next week," observed the factor at last, quite abruptly.

He knitted his thin eyebrows and looked narrowly at Blake.

"Yes?" said Blake with polite interest.

"The company inspector. He gave notice some time ago that he would be here during the month. There's only a week to go now."

"Does he come often?"

"Very seldom. He always gives notice in advance."

"So you have plenty of time to have things spick and span when he arrives."

"Yes — yes. But you have to watch these fellows. The company. They're like that. They're not above sending a man in ahead of time, a spy, just to look things over. You can't be up to them. I know their tricks. I know them."

He was gazing intently at Blake, as if striving to penetrate his thoughts, but Blake was not greatly interested in the company and its tricks, so the conversation went no further. When he had finished his meal he lighted his pipe and excused himself. Mainwaring acknowledged it by a curt nod; he did not look up as Blake left the room.

It was early in the evening, but darkness had fallen. He found it very damp and cold outside. Ragged clouds crept in the sky, across a pale moon, which cast a faint and fitful radiance over the river. The water gleamed wanly here and there, the gleam intensified by the blackness of the opposite shore, where the mass of the forest merged with its own heavy shadow on the river, and even its irregular outline of tree-tops could hardly be distinguished against the murky sky.

The constant, undiminished roar of Deer Falls sounded sullenly in the night. That hollow roar was like a shadow of sound, an ever-present shadow above the trading post. It was incessant, unchanging, as much an irrevocable presence as the very forest.

Morning, noon and night one heard it, without alteration, unremitting, so constant that one hardly noticed it, as one's ears become deadened to the ticking of a clock.

In the winter, thought Blake, the silence must be appalling, with the noise of the falling water stilled, and the minor cadences of the rapids hushed. He felt that the silence, at times, would be as wracking to the nerves as the incessant roar of the falls would often be at other times.

He could understand why men like Mainwaring could sometimes become so keenly conscious of that roar, so keenly conscious of the silence, omnipotent, beyond all power of theirs to change, that it would bear down upon their minds with a crushing force.

He could see the low veil of spray, shimmering mistily at the bottom of the falls; he could see the gray wall of water above. On an obscure impulse, he walked slowly up the trail to the steep rock which overlooked the rapids, and when he reached the summit, he looked out over the tossing, turbulent river.

A sheer drop of thirty feet and the water plunged chaotically below. The rock on which he stood was a narrow ledge on the brink of eternity. Jagged, black shapes of rocks were etched sharply against the boiling whiteness of the river, and there was a smooth roll of silver where it poured over the falls. It was wild and deadly in its beauty.

As he stood there, he reviewed the events of the day. He would leave Deer Landing next morning, he decided, guide or no guide.

There had been something underlying Mainwaring's words at the table that evening. Why had he spoken so pointedly of the inspector's coming? Why had he mentioned the possibility of a company spy being sent ahead? He was accustomed to the factor's eccentricities by now, his bitterness against the company, but those remarks seemed to have been made with a purpose.

It struck him that Mainwaring might think he was a spy, that he might have been sounding him out, thinking to draw an admission of some kind. He might have overheard Latreille after all. There had been something very strange in the factor's eagerness to keep Latreille and Blake apart that morning. He had given no sign that he had overheard the trapper's recognition of Blake, but nevertheless there had been a subtle change in his manner, a puzzled watchfulness, which indicated that, if he did not actually know, he at least suspected that all was not well.

Blake heard a sound behind him, the pad of a footstep on the rock, and he wheeled about, swiftly, to confront a dark figure.

It was Broken Nose.

The halfbreed had approached very quietly. In the wan moonlight he appeared more sinister than ever. He was like an evil and forbidding phantom of the night; his lean, twisted features were more than ordinarily malicious, his gaunt frame was more than usually suggestive of gathering menace.

Blake was not frightened, but he was shaken by this sudden appearance. The halfbreed was there to no good purpose, and Blake's position on that rock, high above the rapids, was fraught with peril.

"What do you want?" he demanded bruskly.

Broken Nose suddenly reached out a lank, bony hand. It shot out swiftly and Blake felt his wrist seized in a grasp so firm and so compelling that, although he instinctively tried to free himself, the effort was futile.

"What's your name?" asked Broken Nose softly.

So! It was coming. Had the halfbreed guessed? Had Latreille dropped him a hint?

"Treniff."

"No." The grasp on Blake's wrist tightened. "Your right name."

"I've told you my right name. It's George Treniff. I'm Mainwaring's nephew."

Blake was striving to gain time, and he tried to edge himself farther down the rock, but Broken Nose held him in a grip of iron.

"No," said Broken Nose again. "You're spy—company spy."

So Mainwaring's words at the table that evening *had* meant something. Blake could hear the querulous voice:

"They're not above sending a man in here ahead of time, a spy, just to look things over You can't be up to them. I know their tricks. I know them."

So Mainwaring *had* overheard Latreille that morning. And, overhearing, knowing that an inspector was to visit the post in a few days, being at a loss to account for the presence of an impostor for any other reason, he had at once assumed Blake to be a company agent.

"Did Mainwaring tell you that?"

"No. Grange."

GRANGE! He could not have been more surprized if a bucket of cold water had been suddenly dashed into his face. Hitherto he had given the assistant little thought in his efforts to solve the puzzle. What had Grange, the faithful worker, the sodden, drunken squaw man, the amiable, shiftless fellow whom the company had sent into the wilderness and forgotten for twenty years—what had he to do with this affair? How could he conclude that Blake was a spy?

He had little time for his amazement at this new angle.

"Spy!" whispered Broken Nose suddenly.

He made a swift movement. Blake saw the shifting glimmer of a knife and, although the halfbreed still grasped his wrist, he plunged quickly to one side. The move was his salvation, for the knife flashed down, but only ripped the sleeve of his coat and, in the next instant, he flung himself at the halfbreed.

Broken Nose still held the knife. Blake wrenched his wrist free and, as his antagonist made desperate efforts to raise the weapon again, he pinned his arm to his side, at the same time shoving his other arm across the halfbreed's throat.

They swayed, silently, Blake desperate in the knowledge that if Broken Nose freed himself for a moment the knife would flash again.

The rock was smooth and treacherous. The halfbreed made a convulsive effort to break free, Blake lost his footing, and they fell heavily. As they went down, the halfbreed's grasp upon the knife relaxed and it clattered upon the rock some distance away.

They clung tensely to each other for a moment, scarcely daring to move, each afraid of giving the other the advantage, and then they sprang into a flurry of action, of pounding fists and flailing legs. They were as one shifting shadow on the rock, under the cold moon, under the overhanging clouds.

And as they fought the rapids splashed and tumbled far below and the hollow roar of the falls sounded like the murmurings of a vast concourse of invisible spectators, far, far away.

They rolled close to the edge of the rock. Blake was conscious of the halfbreed's sinewy strength, his animal agility. The halfbreed was at his back, bony fingers were striving for his throat, he felt himself being urged toward the brink.

In one flashing instant he did find that his head was no longer on firm rock and he was looking far down into a shadowy white maelstrom from which splotches of glistening spray danced and leaped up toward him like the wraiths of a pack of eager wolves, and the sight inspired him to a frantic effort, in which he twisted completely away from Broken Nose and rolled over and over across the rock, away from that deadly verge.

With a snarl, the halfbreed leaped across the narrow space, and again they were at grips, gasping as they punched and gouged and kicked. They rolled back across the rock, near the edge again.

Broken Nose twisted and squirmed like a snake, he managed to slide his arms beneath Blake's armpits, his bony fingers knotted themselves behind Blake's neck.

It was a crushing hold. Broken Nose struggled to his knees and, even as Blake closed his eyes in an agony of apprehension that the next moment he would be hurled over the cliff, he lurched blindly to one side, with all the strength at his command.

He felt the halfbreed's hold loosen, he wrenched himself free, and, as he did, Broken Nose fell backward, wavered a moment as he strove to regain his balance, and then toppled out of sight, his legs waving frantically in the air.

Blake heard a muffled cry, suddenly checked, and then the only sounds were the tumbling of the rapids and the overshadowing roar of the falls. He peered over the cliff. The rapids tossed and plunged about the jagged rocks. The smooth roll of silver at the top of the falls was unbroken.

Of the halfbreed, Broken Nose, there was no sign. The torrent had engulfed him.

STILL shaken by his narrow escape, by the awful suddenness of the half-breed's plunge into oblivion, Blake retraced his steps down the trail. There was a sickening horror in his recollection of that last glimpse of Broken Nose, tottering weirdly over the cliff. But it had been a fight to the death. One or the other had to go. It was evident from the start that the halfbreed sought to kill him. He felt a vast relief that the man was gone; the malicious presence of Broken Nose had been disturbing from the moment he had first seen the man. He was evil incarnate.

He would get to the bottom of the mystery at once. Broken Nose had been sent to kill him. By whom? He had said Grange, but Blake could not believe that the assistant had been behind it. There was no possible motive that he could see.

A yellow light, a feeble yellow light, shone from a window of the trading post. He sprang up the steps, eager to meet Mainwaring or Grange, to demand explanations, to solve the puzzle even if it meant baring his own deception.

The door of Mainwaring's office was open, and he found Grange and the factor arguing heatedly.

"— a showdown," Mainwaring was saying in his high, thin voice.

He was greatly excited, his face was haggard, his eyes were stony. Grange, standing across from him, looked stern and uncompromising. Plainly, he had arrived at an auspicious time.

"A showdown would be best, I think," interrupted Blake.

They stared at him as he stood in the doorway. His clothes were torn, his face was bruised, he was hatless and his hair was disheveled from his struggle with Broken Nose.

Mainwaring's face became suddenly distorted with fear and amazement.

"You," he choked. "How did you——?"

"La Tuque is dead."

"What?" The little man leaped toward him, his face twitching. "You didn't——"

"He tried to knife me. He went over the cliff."

"Ah." Grange's voice was gentle, but his face was very grave as he spoke to Blake. "Tried to knife you?"

"Yes. He said you sent him."

There was no mistaking the assistant's astonishment. His expression was incredulous.

"Me?"

"Yes, you—Grange."

A look of understanding passed over the assistant's face. Slowly, he turned to Mainwaring. The little man had collapsed into his chair. His face was buried in his thin hands and he was rocking to and fro, muttering and moaning incoherently.

"Explain. Quick," snapped Grange, in a tone grown strangely commanding.

"It may as well all come out—it may as well." Mainwaring was half sobbing. His thin voice rose in a wail. "What's the use? We may as well tell him. It was Grange, all right. It was Grange sent La Tuque up there. I sent him. But I didn't tell him to kill you. I swear I didn't. But I was afraid. I thought he was a spy. A company spy. The inspector is coming."

The assistant leaned swiftly forward and grasped him by the shoulder.

"The inspector!"

"Yes, Mr. Mainwaring. The inspector. He's coming next week. I never told you. But I knew. I knew all along. I don't know why I did it. I don't know why——"

His voice trailed weakly away, and he slumped wretchedly in his chair, staring at the wall.

"You see, George," said the other man, quietly. "He's not Mainwaring. I'm Mainwaring. I'm the factor here—your uncle."

"But why?"

Blake was astounded. Grange, the shiftless squaw man, the real factor! And Mainwaring, the little birdlike fellow, not Mainwaring after all! It was confusing.

Mainwaring read his thoughts.

"He's Grange. He's only the assistant. I'm sorry, my boy. We imposed on you. We changed places. You see, I was afraid, when you were coming up here. I was afraid of what you'd think of me. The way I live. I'm no good. This place has beaten me. You can see what I am."

He gestured toward himself. He was only an oldish man, dirty, unshaven, bent of shoulders, ragged of clothing, but there was something fine about his kindly face, something of dignity about his bearing, as he went on, in a dull, unemotional monotone.

"The family, you see. The family. You're a Mainwaring, too. You know what it means. I hope you're not ashamed of me, now that you know the truth. That was what I was afraid of. I've tried. I've tried to keep worthy of the family, to be the gentleman even up here. But it's hard. It's hard, up in this place.

"I couldn't do it. In twenty years—one can slip a great deal. Grange wasn't the same type. He kept up appearances. But the wilderness got him too, but in a different way. You can see that. It got us both. But he didn't show it so much."

It showed in Grange now. He looked only the shell of a man as he sat, crushed, a quivering bundle of nerves, in his chair, mumbling to himself like a senile old man.

"I thought," went on Mainwaring. "I thought if you came up here and found me as I was, a squaw man—we look on that differently in England—broken down, you might be disappointed. Perhaps indignant. You would tell them, in England. Back home. They would feel it too, like a disgrace.

"Your mother has always been proud of me. I couldn't bear that she should be disappointed. I couldn't bear that any of the family should know. So I got Grange, the assistant here, to substitute for me. We changed places. A few days after the guides went down the river I moved the woman and the kids down to Grange's shack, and he came up here to live, to get used to it, to be able to play the factor when you arrived.

"It's the quiet season. There are no Indians around. There was no danger of anybody giving the game away. You would never know the difference. For you've never seen any pictures of me. I've had none taken for years and years. I was sure Grange could carry it off all right, and still I'd be able to see you and talk with you and appreciate you—and I haven't been disappointed in you, George. It hurt me to do it. But the family, you know."

THIS voice was wistful, and suddenly Blake was overcome with a tremendous sympathy for this kindly old man and he felt that he understood him, this man in whom a flame of pride still burned so high that he would go to any lengths of sacrifice and deception to maintain a fine illusion of himself for the family that he loved.

The wilderness had long since defeated him, he had yielded to it at the price of his self-respect, but the greatest concern was not for himself, but for the family name, the traditions from which he had departed, and he had lived a magnificent lie, had maintained a splendid falsehood all those years in order that the family should not know and that its name should never suffer.

The irony of the situation struck him in all its force. He, Michael Blake, was substituting for George Treniff, poor, miserable, little Treniff, who could not bear to disappoint the uncle whom, he was convinced, was the very essence of family tradition.

And the uncle, in turn, was deceiving the imposter because he could not bear to disappoint the nephew in whom, he well believed, all the honorable traditions of his name had been inculcated and justified.

It was a tragic farce, and Blake knew then that he would continue his deception to the end, in order that Mainwaring's last illusion should not be shattered. Anything else, he felt, would be criminal.

"If it hadn't been for that letter. That letter," broke in Grange.

The little man fumbled in a pocket of his jacket and produced a soiled missive, which he extended to the factor.

"It was in the mail one day. I opened it. It said the inspector would be here this month. That was before you sent the guides down for George. I didn't show it to you. It gave me the idea."

He got up shakily from the chair and went over to Mainwaring, frail and pathetic, all his nimble agility gone, succeeded by a dull despair, a penitential misery.

"You know how long I've worked here, Mr. Mainwaring. Twenty years. Without promotion. Never any change. They bury you up here and forget about you. The company. I know them."

A trace of the old bitterness crept into his voice. Blake remembered how the little man had waxed indignant over the plight of the supposed assistant, that first morning at the post. He had been describing his own case all the time.

"You made me factor in your place. It was just for a while. But it seemed real to me. Real. After twenty years to have a taste of power and influence, even if it didn't mean anything. I wanted it to last forever. I knew the inspector was coming. You didn't know, or you would never have taken the risk.

"For if he came and found me in charge, you living in your shack back there—you know what would have happened. There'd have been a row. Most likely I'd get the factorship to keep. I knew they wouldn't let you go altogether; you're too good a fur man for that.

"They'd have set you back to my job. And you'd have never known that I had planned it. It would have seemed that things just happened that way."

He sighed heavily and looked down at the floor.

"I knew that if your nephew came and went away again before the inspector arrived, you'd take over the post again. I could see the chance slipping away from me. I didn't know when the inspector would come. It might be any time. So before they left, I told the guides to delay, to keep Treniff down the river for a week or so, and by the time he'd get here it would be all over.

"The plan seemed perfect. But Treniff got away from them. He came up alone. I was paddling above the portage one morning and he hailed me in the fog. He gave his name. I tell you, it gave me a start. I didn't know what to do. It looked as though I would lose out after all. He would only stay a few days, I knew, and he might be away again before the inspector came. I—I rammed his canoe, in the fog—God forgive me—I wasn't myself—but he reached shore.

"I was back at the post before he arrived. I was glad, glad when he came in. I thought I'd killed him, and I was nearly crazy. When he showed up safe and sound, I was so relieved. But then I had to make sure he would be kept here until the inspector came. When he suggested going away, I put him off from day to day. It wouldn't do with things running so smoothly.

"When that trapper, Latreille, came this morning, he nearly gave the game away. He was just about to call me Grange, my real name, with Treniff standing there, but I hustled him into the office. It was a close call. And all the while, I was puzzled, for I'd been coming out the door when he met the boy here—and he didn't call him Treniff. He called him Blake."

A look of astonishment passed over Mainwaring's face.

"What does that mean, George?"

"I met the man in Wigwam Falls," said Blake. "There were others with me at the time. A man named Blake was one of them. Latreille was introduced to us. I suppose he confused our names. That's the only way I can explain it."

He told the lie quite easily, quite calmly, and he felt that it was a merciful lie, for a shadow of doubt cleared from the old man's countenance.

"I was suspicious," went on Grange. "I tried to find more about you from Latreille, but he said he knew nothing. I thought you were a company agent, sent up here to spy on us, and that you had posed as Treniff. I told La Tuque and he said he'd frighten you, so you would go away and not report to the company. But I'd no idea—no idea he would try to kill you.

"And that's the story. That's the story," concluded Grange, wearily. "I don't know why I did it all. This country, this place. You know how it gets a man. He doesn't think right. I saw a chance to get the factorship here. The company hadn't used me right."

"I know," said Mainwaring mildly. He patted Grange's shoulder, gently. "We forgive you."

Blake was sorry for Grange. The little fellow's words that first morning at the post came back to him, when he had been bitterly sympathetic for the assistant, for himself, and he saw him as a faithful underling, working for so many years in this bleak, solitary spot, with little reward and without recognition, until his nerves had wilted in the struggle.

He could understand how the little man would cling so pitifully to the one opportunity for promotion, the one chance to better himself, that had come to him in all that time, even though it meant dishonesty.

"It's all right, Grange," he said. "No harm's been done."

"Except," Mainwaring looked up at him. "Except that now you know what your uncle really is."

"And I think none the less of you," said Blake. "Back in England they'll not know anything you don't wish them to know. I'll describe you as you are—a real gentleman."

He held out his hand. Mainwaring took it.

"Thank you, George," said the old factor with dignity. "The family, you know." He smiled wryly. "They think I lead an idyllic sort of existence up here. Sort of gentleman czar of the wilderness. I'd hate to disappoint them."

He motioned slightly to Grange, and there was sympathy in his voice and a very human understanding.

"Grange, here," he went on, quietly, "is not quite himself. I understand, perhaps, a little more than you, what he's endured. The temptation this was to him. This place has affected him. And he's worked very hard. I'll speak to the inspector about him. Grange has never pushed himself forward very much, but I think I'll be able to get him a long holiday and perhaps a promotion. A transfer, if he wants it, at least."

"Anything—anything," muttered Grange from his chair.

"John Turtle will take you back in the morning," said Mainwaring. "You needn't be afraid to go with him now."

"Of course not—uncle."

Mainwaring smiled, slowly.

"I'm glad to hear you call me that," he said. "You're a good boy."

His eyes suddenly filled, and Blake tactfully turned toward the door. He must go to his room, he said; he had mislaid his pipe.

In the doorway he paused. Grange, the little birdlike man, whom the wilderness had so cruelly overwhelmed, was hunched in his chair and his face was transfigured.

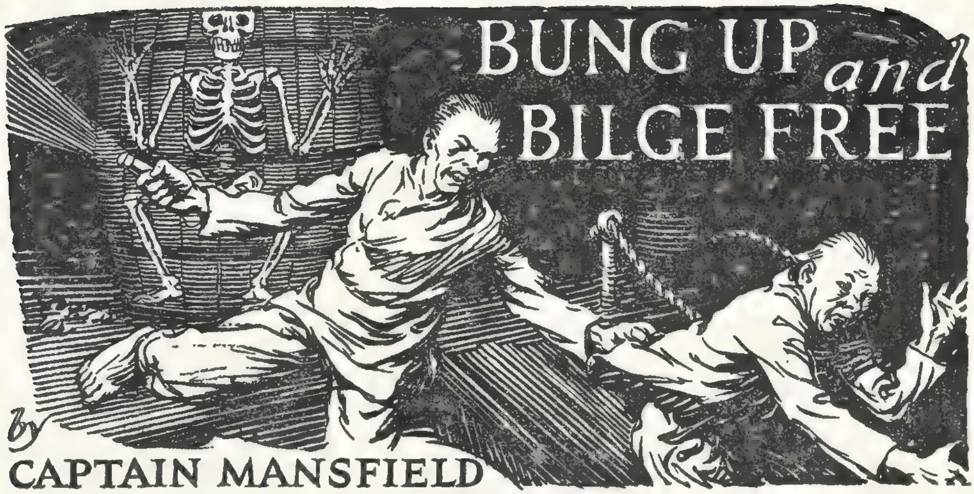
"Going away from here," he murmured almost unbelievingly. "A transfer—perhaps promotion—going away—dear God——"

Two old men. Two baffled, lonely old men, victims of a vast and inscrutable isolation.

MAINWARING had moved over to the wall, and he was looking up at the crest. The family crest. His shoulders seemed a little straighter, his whole bearing more erect. He was like an acolyte before the altar of his devotion.

"He's a good boy—it's a good family."

Blake closed the door, gently. He was an impostor; they had all been impostors, but he alone had been unexposed. It was better so. He was glad, glad he had been worthy of the deception.



BUNG UP and BILGE FREE

by

CAPTAIN MANSFIELD

Author of "The Bobo."

"TROUBLES!" exclaimed Captain Butts of the *Lake Champlain* heatedly. He shifted a wrathful glance to the Singapore agent, and continued in scathing tones. "Blast my eyes! If it isn't one thing after another in these feeder ships. Here we are with half a million dollars in specie and gold leaf aboard and nobody to guard it but a Chinese crew. I can't spare a white officer for the job."

"It's safe in the treasure room, isn't it?" offered the agent with the air of one who could easily bear another man's troubles. "Say the word, and I'll send a couple of Sikh policemen aboard to guard the treasure while you're in Singapore.

"Safe! Treasure room!" grated the captain scornfully. "That strong room built into the shelter deck that every one from the coal bunkers has access to? That strong room which any man can open with a can opener? I don't want any policemen. It's not while we are in port that I fear any dirty work. It's at sea, man, that I lose sleep, and worry my hair gray over that treasure.

"You haven't forgotten the *Lake Titicaca*, have you? How somewhere between Hongkong and Singapore some of the crew drilled into the strong room, same as ours, and looted forty thousand dollars? There was no one aboard but the regular crew. They are still looking for that treasure."

"I have not forgotten," said the agent soulfully. "Seeing as how it was consigned to me. Luckily it was insured. But I must go ashore to the office." The agent drained his glass of Scotch and soda. "I'll have your papers aboard so that you can sail at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Couple of lighters of cargo for you. Not enough to put you to the expense of docking the ship. Don't worry about that treasure. See you later."

Coincident with the agent's departure was the arrival of another man aboard the *Lake Champlain*. He was a young man good to look at, the captain told himself as he regarded the stranger from the depths of his long deck chair under the awning.

"Good morning, Captain!" said the new arrival pleasantly, flashing white teeth in a smile. "I want to get to the westward."

"So do I, my son, but I have to wait till my cargo is under hatches.

"I would like to sail with you."

The captain appraised the bright red hair and blue eyes of the stranger and shook his head.

"Can't be done. Not allowed to carry passengers," he said shortly.

The youth flushed under his freckles. He gave the captain his card. "I can't sail as a passenger, sir. I have to work my way."

The captain took the card and while he digested this last statement, he read—

JOHN GRANT,
TRAVELERS' CLUB,
NEW YORK CITY.

"Bung Up and Bilge Free," copyright, 1925, by Captain Mansfield.

That done, he surveyed the immaculate white ducks of his visitor and exclaimed:

"What! Work with my Chinese crew? Nothing doing."

"But I just have to get to the westward, Captain. I'm working my way round the world. I have to be at the Travelers' Club in New York at midnight January first to win ten thousand dollars. I had six months to do it in, but unfortunately it has taken me two months to get this far."

"Ha! Ha! That's a good one young fellow. You take your story aboard some of those English ships. I'm too old a bird to be snared by any such yarn."

"I have been aboard all the ships, sir, and none of the captains will let me work my way."

"Well, you think up some other scheme. If I carried all the around-the-world hobos that applied to me, the U. S. Shipping Board Corporation would go broke feeding them. No! Nix! *Nein!*"

"Please, Captain, be a sport and take a chance. I'll work at any job you give me."

"No! I say!" exclaimed the captain with excessive emphasis. "I have troubles of my own. The only way you can travel with me is on an order from the agent ashore, here. You go and see him."

"I've seen the agent, sir, and he will not give me an order."

"——! If that's the case what are you pestering me for? Go see the American consul. Tell him you're a shipwrecked sailor, and he will send you home—maybe."

"I interviewed the consul, sir. He threatened to send me home eastward, back the way I came, if I didn't get out of his office. Then all would have been lost."

"Ha! Ha! That would have been a horse on you, for a fact. That consul is pestered to death with fellows like you. Go ashore now, and don't bother me any more. It's as much as my job is worth to carry deadheads. Good bye and good luck to you."

"Hold on, Captain, just a moment!" said Grant enthusiastically. "Take me to the westward as far as you go, and I will guard the treasure for you."

"Treasure! What treasure?" roared the skipper; then with more moderate voice, and very red in the face, he continued—

"We've got no treasure aboard here."

"I couldn't help hearing you and the agent discussing it, sir, while I waited on the lower deck for him to leave," he said apologetically.

"Ahem! You forget about any treasure, young fellow, and go ashore."

"All right, Captain," said Mr. Grant, still maintaining his good-natured smile, but somewhat crestfallen, nevertheless. "I'll go ashore now, but I'm going to sail with you at four tomorrow, and I'll help guard the treasure."

"You do and I'll maroon you on some island in the Malacca Strait where you'll stay till the angels skate in ——"

Mr. Grant bent his tall, muscular form in a bow to the angry skipper. Then with squared shoulders he stalked across the deck and descended the gangway to his waiting sanpan.

MR. GRANT perched himself on the low seat of the sampan. With chin and knees assembled, his long arms wrapped about his shins, he allowed the muscles of his prominent jaw to relax, and the frown caused by deep cogitation to fade from his forehead. The smile remained. It was always in evidence, if not on his lips it was in his eyes—ineradicable.

"Ishmael," said he to the swarthy follower of the prophet who was wielding the long sculling oar behind him, "who is the number one stevedore of Singapore? The great man who loads and unloads all the ships?"

"Government, sar. Harbor Board, sar," answered the sampan man readily. "To heem I pay license."

"No! No! I mean a man, a private company. Is there no one to load ships but the board?"

Ishmael grunted loudly in unison with the strokes of his long scull as he rounded the end of the sea wall. On the placid waters of the Inner Roads he rested and meditated. Deliberately he adjusted his sarong that had come loose by his late exertions with the oar. Deliberately, and still pondering, he wiped the sweat from his eyes and helped himself bountifully to betelnut and all the sundries that make it delectable. Then as he resumed sculling on the last leg of the trip to the landing pier, he mumbled thickly—

"Ho! The sahib means Ali Swat."

He pointed to a fleet of nondescript lighters and boats, some on the mud and some in the water. They fringed the seaward edge of a small plot of land, whereon was a bungalow painted bright green and yellow.

"Ali Swat. Ali Swat," repeated Mr. Grant to impress the name on his mind. Then to the sanpan man he ordered—

"Put me on shore there at the bungalow of Ali Swat."

"No sar! The police, sar! Sahibs must land at the pier," sorrowfully explained the sampan man.

Mr. Grant remembered that harbor regulation and said no more about it. When they reached the pier he scrambled out and held out the usual fare.

"Me poor man, sar," began Ishmael in a dismal whine.

He made no move to take the money.

"How much do you want?"

"Ver beeg family. The sahib knows."

"How much?"

"Ai—ie—e, sar. I, a well of information am to sahib—guide, protector from all other misbegotten sampan men."

Ishmael rolled his eyes in agony at the thought of asking too little or more than would be paid.

"How much?"

The man fairly writhed in anguish. He mutely appealed to high Heaven, to Allah, to witness this rich, white man who had hardened his heart against a chance to acquire merit by a small gift to charity.

And the crowd of idlers that had quickly gathered cast malignant looks at Grant while it offered words of encouragement to the sampan man in as many tongues as were spoken at the tower of Babel.

Then the inevitable Sikh policeman, tall, bewhiskered, and swinging a club, came majestically toward them. As the crowd magically melted into nothingness, Ishmael literally snatched the money from Grant's extended hand and sculled rapidly away.

Mr. Grant's smile broke into a laugh. He nodded pleasantly to the policeman, and ran lightly up the broad gangway to the street. There he ignored the vociferations of the Chinese riksha coolies, and as one of them was not granted the privilege of wheeling the white man in his exaggerated perambulator, all of them in the vicinity, a score or more, took up a position behind him and followed in solemn procession to the bungalow of Ali Swat.

According to the seafaring men that run cargoes in and out of Singapore, Ali Swat is a good sport. His name is one to conjure with. Always accommodating, he is ever ready, for a small percentage, to execute any commission involving a Straits Settlement dollar or lakhs of rupees. No amount of tonnage is too great or too small for him to handle. A thirty foot python from the Malay States is crated and delivered on board ship with the same neatness and despatch as a box of sheet rubber. Thousands of tons of stinking fertilizer has the same care and attention as a crate of valuable orchids.

Rumor once had it that he was the Maharajah of Baroda. Again that he was a Chinese coolie too illiterate to sign his own name. Also that he was that Captain McSwat of County Mayo who brought an East Indiaman out in the days of Hastings.

As the years passed the rumors died from lack of interest, till today no one seems to care whether or not there is any such person. But no seafarer has ever claimed to have seen Ali Swat.

Mr. Grant knew nothing of this famed stevedore, but fate in the person of Ishmael, the sampan man, directed him to the man of all men in Singapore whom he most needed.

At the office door of the bungalow he was met by a tall Mohammedan whose face might have been a model for the Apollo Belvedere. This gentleman was dressed in a yellow pongee jacket, checkered green and black sarong, and green turban. A three-karat white diamond ring graced the little finger of his left hand, while on his feet were patent leather Oxfords without socks. He politely directed Mr. Grant to wide swinging doors at the left.

"I want to see Mr. Ali Swat," began Mr. Grant when he had entered a room deliciously cool, and seated himself in a Vienna bentwood chair.

"Sorry, but Mr. Swat is away on his estate and I do not know when he will return. Anything I can do for you? I have full power in the way of business, Captain."

"Grant is my name, but I am no sea captain."

"And mine is Rahani. But before we talk business, Mr. Grant, what will you drink?"

Grant named Scotch and soda, and while Rahani was taking the bottle from a large icebox that faced the piano across the room, he allowed his gaze to roam over the pictures of famous clipper ships and steamers that hung on the wall.

"This is some room you have here," he said when Rahani placed the drink before him.

"Yes. Most of our business is done with sea captains, and I fitted this room up to entertain them when they come to the office. They have quite jolly times here. At the rear is another room for the mates and stewards when they come to us with their orders, for we are dubashers as well as stevedores. Now to business. What can I do for you, Mr. Grant?"

"First of all, Mr. Rahani, my business is strictly confidential. Have I your word that it will go no farther?"

"Certainly, if you wish it."

Mr. Rahani showed no surprize. Possibly he had been startled so many times by wild and hazardous propositions that he was immune.

Grant drew a chair beside the one he occupied and said—

"Sit here please so that I can speak low."

Rahani complied, and Grant began to state his business. Soon Mr. Rahani's eyes grew big with astonishment as he emphatically shook his head. Then astonishment faded as he laughed over Grant's persuasive words.

"It can't be done," he said when Grant stopped talking and leaned back in his chair.

"Can't be done? Did I hear you aright? Why can't it be done?" said Grant sarcastically.

His blue eyes hardened, but retained their smile.

"Why—why—the red tape to be gone through, which you evidently know nothing about. The risk to the reputation of our firm, to say nothing of the penalty, if discovered. It's sure to become known. Besides I must consult my chief, Ali Swat."

"Rats!" hissed Grant, forcefully, if inelegantly. "You told me you had full swing here. What is red tape for if not to be overcome? Man alive, you are throwing away money, easy money. I'll raise my offer. Fifty dollars."

Rahani gripped the arms of his chair till his knuckles showed white. He squirmed and shook his head.

"Seventy-five!" Grant rasped. He saw the avaricious gleam, like a rapacious vulture's in Rahani's eyes, and he knew it was only a matter of dollars; all else was pure bluff. All he had to do was to keep on bidding till he reached his limit.

Rahani wiped beads of sweat from his forehead, avoided Grant's direct gaze, and murmured—"I—we—could not possibly assume the——"

"Eighty dollars," cut in Grant. "Eighty dollars for a couple of hours' work. Man, you're skinning me to a fare-you-well. Have a heart!"

"Make it an even hundred," whispered Rahani, mistaking Grant's smile for amiability. "It means a heavy fine, jail——"

"—— if I do! Take it or leave it. I've reached my limit. Grant thumped the table with his fist, smiled at Rahani, and reached for his hat.

"Oh, you Americans!" exclaimed Mr. Rahani with a deep sigh. "You are good fellows, you know, but you drive a bally hard bargain."

Mr. Grant drew a roll of bills from his pocket and counted out eighty dollars. Mr. Rahani looked on with gracious interest, but raised his eyebrows slightly when he saw there was nothing left of the roll.

AH NIM YU was number one fireman on the *Lake Champlain*. He was a long, thin individual, lived mostly on opium, but he could handle firemen. Ah Nim was broke. His small share of the proceeds of the little job on the strong room of the *Lake Titicaca* was gone. Life was hectic for Ah Nim while the money lasted. But banquets with singsong girls, and gambling take lots of cash. Credit was an unknown quantity in Ah Nim's life.

What more natural than that he should again seek the goose that laid the golden egg? The *Lake Champlain* was the prize he drew after an interview with the wily comprador of the E. Z. E Navigation Company that operated the lake type of vessels owned by the United States Shipping Corporation.

"It is an opportunity of enriching oneself that the superior man can not overlook and keep the respect of his ancestors," offered the crafty comprador at the conclusion of his interview. He added—"The *Lake Champlain* carried much more treasure than the *Lake Titicaca*, the last job I engineered."

"The comprador is rich. The bones of

many of his ancestors rest in a beautiful tomb on a Swatow hill," said Ah Nim to the two other firemen he had chosen to help him. "We are poor men," he went on. "We earn our rice by much sweat, and our ancestors—" he shook his head sadly—"where do they rest? The stars in the sky would be easier to lay hands on. Therefore I say the words of the comprador are fragrant with wisdom.

"If one has no ancestors to honor what is the use of money," asked the smallest of the trio, a pessimistic person whom the heat had shriveled; whom the others called the "Shrimp." "The Hongkong police have long arms."

"Not so long as the spirit arms of our forbears," answered Ah Nim enigmatically. "They will protect us from all police if we do our duty by them."

He favored the Shrimp with a look of reproof.

The other fireman, appropriately named Yap Gan, slowly nodded his head and indolently put another pinch of tobacco in his evil-smelling pipe. His aspect was of one whom the furnace fires had long since burned out all ambition except a half hearted desire to keep alive. If number one claimed that the moon was a large bowl of samshu, he would have agreed for the sake of peace.

It was the third night out from Hong Kong before the coal covering the top of the strong room in the shelter deck was shovcled into the lower bunkers. They had three nights left in which to work before the steamer reached Singapore, their first port of call. Three nights to drill into the strong room and loot the treasure before the Singapore consignment of it was taken ashore.

The drilling had to be done at night and in their watch below. They were too busy feeding the fires in their watch on duty, and they would have been seen or heard in the daytime. In spite of hard work and loss of sleep the job remained unfinished when the ship arrived at Singapore. It was with stoical faces they watched a few small boxes of specie passed into a launch and taken ashore. But the Shrimp complained loudly, for a man without ancestors on which to spend money.

"They rob us," he said with covetous looks at the treasure.

"Never mind, brothers," said Ah Nim. "Enough remains in the strong room to make us all rich men. I heard that turtle's son of a mate say the ship leaves for Colombo at four o'clock. So tonight we finish the drilling and remove the treasure from the strong room."

It was midnight when Ah Nim and his brethren went off duty. Quickly they repaired to the shelter deck to finish their job. A few more holes to be drilled and a section of the steel deck large enough to admit the Shrimp could be removed.

The nimble Shrimp, in the lead, grabbed the rope that enabled them to climb the smooth chute and started up hand over hand. When his head emerged into the inky blackness of the shelter deck, the Shrimp stopped climbing. He remained frozen to the rope, staring at the phosphorescent gleam of a gruesome, human skeleton that floated in midair close to him. Each bone, from skull to pedal extremity, stood out with startling distinctness, emitting tiny points of fire in the Cimmerian gloom.

The Shrimp's hair stood on end. His eyes threatened to leave his head and jump into the sightless sockets of the skull at which he glared.

"W-W-Wow!" he shrieked after several futile attempts, and started down the rope.

His feet landed on the head of Ah Nim who was hanging to the line just below him, nearly dislocating that person's neck.

"Blockhead! Fool! May Men-shin meet you with a club!" cried Ah Nim in exasperated tones. "What troubles you? Go on up."

It was either to go up or drop to the steel floor plates of the lower bunkers, so muttering incantations to protect himself from all evil spirits, the Shrimp went up. Ah Nim quickly followed, saw what had unmanned his mate, and for a moment stood as if petrified. Soon his voice came in strange, unnatural tones.

"Ho!" he quavered. "The light! Shrimp! The light!"

He trembled and held forth an unsteady hand.

The shrimp groped in a tool bag that was slung around his neck and produced a flashlight. As he gave it into Ah Nim's trembling fingers, Yap Gan, the third treasure hunter, emerged through the coal chute and stood by his shipmate in the shelter deck. Yap Gan tried to express his emotion at sight of the terrifying skeleton. Words failed him. He became the mere shell of a man, an automaton, powerless to move.

The light was snapped on revealing a large barrel on which was painted a skeleton, also a placard in Chinese characters. Ah Nim, after studying these, grew more composed. He heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"The writing is good joss, brothers. It says he has gone home to his family."

"His family should have kept him at home," said the Shrimp.

He shrank back affrightedly, and peered into the gloom about him as if he expected the spirit of the departed one to grab him.

Then Yap Gan came to life—very much so. He stood not on the order of his going. He was on his way to the lower bunkers via the air route when Ah Nim grabbed him by the tail of a serviceable shirt and held on.

"Stay, brother! It is some one's father going home to his tomb. Behold! It says so on the barrel."

He flashed the light on the placard and drew Yap Gan to him, backward, by his shirt tail.

Yap Gan protested violently at first, casting fearsome glances over his shoulder, but calmed himself somewhat at number one's soothing voice and speech.

All might have gone well. The all-important drilling might have been resumed in peace if at that ill-omened moment the skeleton had not winked. It was more horrible than any ordinary wink. For the space of two clock ticks, brilliant beams of light shot through the black sockets of the skull. They cast shadows on the facial bones and formed a hideous leer.

Again Ah Nim showed his metal, showed why he was number one fireman. He beat his two shipmates to the coal chute and fought them back.

"Stay here, timid ones!" he said, panting for breath, when the other two lay groaning on the steel deck. "It is written that the love of daring, without the will to learn, casts the shadow called turbulence. I know what troubles the spirit of the departed one. He is hungry. It is a common thing for skeletons to wink. I have known them to do far worse than wink when the spirit requires food. Lucky for us we are still alive to furnish the offering. Misfortune will follow the unfilial relative that sent the hallowed bones and protecting spirit on a journey without food. I must hasten and bring some more."

"Let me bring it," cried Yap Gan yearningly. "I crave to serve the spirits."

"You will both stay here as hostages that I bring back food," answered Ah Nim, a note of finality in his voice. "And bear in your foolish minds that he is listening and observing us now. If either of you even move, he is liable to get angry. How would you like to waken in the morning and find your hair gone? All plucked out while you slept? Or waken and find yourselves cross-eyed? I've known firemen who were bald and cross-eyed too," concluded Ah Nim, darkly.

"That writing on the barrel—it may tell of food inside," offered the Shrimp hopefully as he nursed a rapidly swelling eye.

"Writing!" exclaimed number one with a grunt of disgust. "Marks of the foreign devils that possibly tell the destination of the barrel. Here is one in Chinese too, which says, 'Stow bung up and bilge free.' What do the foreign devils know of the spirits and their needs? You are wrong, Shrimp, as usual."

With a last command to stay where they were, on pain of the spirit's displeasure and terrible consequences, Ah Nim disappeared down the chute in quest of food.

The Shrimp sat up and with an ear cocked in an attitude of listening, shot oblique, fearsome glances at the skeleton.

"Did you hear it, Yap Gan?" he asked in a whisper.

"Hear what?" asked Yap Gan in equally awed tones.

"The laugh! It was the laugh of a fiend. But just as I heard it, Ah Nim's flail-like fist caught me in the eye. I went down and forgot all about it."

"Since you mention it, I remember hearing something that was not number one's voice. It must have been some evil spirit laughing at our fight. I think I will move nearer the chute to help Ah Nim when he comes with the food."

"A good idea, brother. I will move nearer, also. It is a hard climb up the rope."

After a while the Shrimp reached out his hand and touched Yap Gan. "Why don't you move?" he whispered.

"Why don't *you* move?" asked Yap Gan in low, peeved tones. "I think you are afraid to move."

"I have all my hair," said the Shrimp thankfully.

"And my eyes are straight yet," said Yap Gan.

"Take this basket," said another voice which sent them bounding to their feet. It was Ah Nim with the food offering.

Bowls of cooked rice, fish and pork were placed on deck near the barrel. To make the offering more ceremonial several joss sticks were put upright between chunks of coal and lighted. Gilt and red papers were also burned to appease the hungry spirit.

"No doubt but there are evil spirits hovering about," said Ah Nim, "and we should have some noise. There is nothing like a few fire crackers to get on the nerves of evil spirits and drive them away. But that turtle's son, the mate, would be sure to hear them, so we must trust to luck and incantations."

ENSUED a period of watchful waiting for the three treasure hunters, and as no portent either good or evil occurred to base a belief that the spirit of the departed was dissatisfied with the ceremony, the firemen proceeded to the top of the strong room and their drilling.

As they walked aft, a gaunt, black rat, seemingly all tail and whiskers, materialized out of the Stygian gloom of the shelter deck and encroached on the perquisites of the skeleton's guardian shade.

"The superior man is always ready to meet any emergency," began Ah Nim boastfully, when the electric wire had been screwed to a socket in the ship's side and the drill was biting into steel.

"And what is more," went on Yap Gan pompously, "a man may commit to memory the three hundred odes, even be able to repeat them backward—and if he has not common sense, how will he meet a crisis?"

"Too much talk," offered the Shrimp, sourly. "Have you not heard the old saying that a man must insult himself before others will?"

Ah Nim kept silent.

Heretofore they had not penetrated the deck, leaving a film of steel at the bottom of each hole lest the steel shavings drop into the strong room and betray them. Now, as this night's work was to finish the job and make them all rich, they drilled right through, thus saving much time.

The last hole was finished, the oval piece of deck lifted out and a rope made fast to the Shrimp. He seemed not overjoyed at the prospect of being a rich man as they lowered him into the black void of the strong room. With spirits, evil and otherwise, hovering near the black solitude of the treasure room was uninviting to say the least.

"The higher type of man is calm and serene. The inferior man is constantly agitated and worried," stated Ah Nim in soothing tones, with the obvious intent of calming the Shrimp's frayed feelings.

The only answer to this truism was a loud grunt accompanied by a string of expletives, which advised the two above that their ally had reached the end of his short, downward journey.

Came a jerk on the rope Yap Gan held. He pulled up a box of specie.

Ah Nim laid his flashlight on deck so that its rays shot across the opening, and taking the small box forward, placed it on deck by the coal chute.

This procedure was followed until the Shrimp's nervous voice announced—

"You have all the boxes. Hasten and pull me up."

A succession of jerks took him almost to the opening, when a loud ejaculation came from Ah Nim at the coal chute, an outcry so blended with anguish, fear and desperation that Yap Gan let go the rope at the end of which the Shrimp was dangling.

A few frantic steps took Ah Nim to the flashlight and his henchman at the strong room top.

"The treasure is gone!" he cried in an ecstasy of fury, snatching up the light.

Yap Gan blinked rapidly; soundlessly his lips moved as a dumb man's might.

"Gone! The treasure! Idiot!" yelled Ah Nim. "Come to your senses quickly and help me find it."

He rushed forward with the light.

Yap Gan gave a violent start and tottered along in the wake of Ah Nim, his stoical features assuming a look of corroding suspicion.

The Shrimp, with just indignation, demanded immediate release from the strong room, but his pleas were unavailing.

High and low, fore and aft, not a nook nor cranny in the shelter deck that would conceal a joss stick was left unrevealed by the flash light in the hand of Ah Nim, but no treasure was found.

Their round of nerve-wracking search,

momentarily growing more perfunctory, brought them back to the barrel with its grisly spectre.

"By chance a mischievous spirit might have pushed the boxes down the coal chute, where a coal passer has found them," said Yap Gan with a crafty look at his partner in crime. "It would be well for one to search there."

"No! No!" cried the former with violent emotion. "See!"

He flashed the light on deck where faint outlines of the boxes were visible in the coal dust.

"Not a sign is there of a box having been dragged or pushed on deck."

"No," Ah Nim continued, "the boxes have disappeared into thin air. To recover them we must use the rites that spirits know and understand. Look! The food offering is all gone and the joss sticks burned out. I will procure another offering while you help the Shrimp out of the strong room."

He passed the light to Yap Gan, gathered the empty bowls, and putting them in the basket, slid down the rope to the lower bunkers.

Yap Gan, left alone, flashed the light on deck at his feet. Myriads of tiny tracks showed where a mighty gathering of long tailed rats had assembled and accounted for the missing food offering. Yap Gan's eyes grew big with fear.

"There is no reason why spirits may not take the form of rats," he muttered with a shudder, and glanced furtively about; but his frightened glances were irresistibly drawn back to the skeleton.

The Shrimp in the strong room wailed dismally. Demands for release had changed to frantic supplication. It was no place to be entombed while demon spirits were hovering about.

Yap Gan, with his fascinated gaze on the skeleton, took a step backward, toward the strong room and the Shrimp, when the skeleton winked. It was more than Yap Gan's overstrung nerves could bear. With a shriek of terror he snatched the rope and shot down to the lower coal bunkers.

"What now, fool?" angrily demanded Ah Nim, who had hurriedly helped himself to the firemen's night lunch and was on his way back.

"The skeleton winked again," chattered Yap Gan in gasps.

"A good augury, simpleton, if you only knew it," said Ah Nim. "The spirit's hunger is unappeased. Come! We will go back and surely find the treasure now."

He literally drove Yap Gan in front of him, back to the rope. That thoroughly frightened person, after protesting in vain, evidently willing that the spirits might have the treasure if they wanted it, sullenly grasped the rope, and while Ah Nim held a strain on it, began to climb. When he was well above Ah Nim, the rope let go at the top.

Down came Yap Gan, saving himself bruises by landing on Ah Nim. Down came the rope and flaked itself about them, their entrance to the shelter deck cut off. Yap Gan arose from the back of his shipmate's head where he was seated and stared stupidly upward.

Ah Nim extracted his face from the coal pile. He spit out coal and scathing remarks anent Yap Gan's imbecilic ancestors, back to the beginning of time.

"Out of my sight, son of a mangy dog, before I lose control of myself and kill you."

Yap Gan slunk away. Four bells, six o'clock. It was time for Ah Nim to turn to.

CAPTAIN BUTTS had finished his six o'clock coffee and toast, and with the inner man thus fortified until breakfast, he paced the floor of his room, enjoying his pipe. About the third lap of his walk he turned and very surprizingly met Mr. Grant.

"You!" exclaimed the skipper grimly as their eyes met.

"None other, Captain. I trust you had a good night's rest."

Mr. Grant was his old smiling self, debonair as ever. But he and his once immaculate white duck clothes were sadly soiled with coal dust.

The skipper ignored his polite enquiry and barked savagely.

"So you stowed away in the coal bunkers! I told you if you came aboard here again I'd maroon you."

"Yes, Captain, but you specified the Malacca Straits. We are out in the Bay of Bengal now. You surely wouldn't go back just to maroon me would you?"

The skipper eyed his uninvited guest savagely.

"Of all the monumental nerve. I'll put

you in irons on bread and water till we make Colombo."

"No you won't, Captain. Not after you've heard my story."

"Won't I?" said the skipper, fuming with rage. "I'll show you."

Mr. Grant held forth a restraining hand. It was a steady hand if it was black with coal dust.

"To begin with, Captain, your treasure was stolen last night."

"My treasure! Your grandmother!" exclaimed the captain, heatedly, though a shadow did cross his blue eyes.

"Fact, Captain! I saw your strong room being drilled into, and the boxes taken out."

For a moment the captain stared at Grant with a look of incredulity, then muttering "——'s bells!" he rushed into his room, grabbed a flashlight from his desk and sprinted for the shelter deck.

Mr. Grant followed him, passing the Chinese boatswain on the way. That seafarer, seeing a stranger running after the captain, joined the race and was third man at the post. Straight for the top of the strong room rushed the skipper. All that he feared had come to pass. The only treasure his light revealed was a weazened, forlorn looking fireman, the Shrimp.

"Snake him out of there, Bosun,' 'he ordered in a weak voice, "and we'll see what he has to say." He turned to Grant. "Where were you while this was going on? Why didn't you call me?"

"I was watching them through the auger holes in my barrel, and could not call you because the shelter deck doors were closed."

"You saw them! What did they do with the boxes?" cut in the skipper, his eyes snapping.

"Put themi n here." Grant walked to his barrel by the coal chute. "You can see the marks of the boxes in the coal dust on deck."

"Well, what then?"

Grant went into peals of laughter while the skipper scowled and doubled his fists.

"Go on!" he growled.

"Captain," said Grant when he could speak coherently, "when I think of that long, thin fireman discovering the loss of the treasure it is too much for me. It was this way. When he laid a box on deck and turned his back to go for another, I opened the door of my barrel and took it in. Strange as it may seem, he did not discover his loss until I had the last box safe. You see they were afraid of my barrel—thought it was full of evil spirits or something. Offered me food, and burned joss sticks."

"You have the treasure in the barrel!" roared the skipper, bewildered.

"I have, sir," said Grant, swinging open his barrel door. "Look!"

The captain looked.

"——'s bells! Man! I have to hand it to you!" offered the skipper.

"To Ali Swat of Singapore, you mean, Captain," said Mr. Grant modestly. "His was the genius that made it possible to save your treasure. He knew Chinese superstitions and fixed up my barrel so that none of your Chinese crew would touch it, and I could get to the westward to Colombo."

The skipper examined the barrel and laughed. He was in good humor now that the treasure was safe.

"Orchids—The Jones Co., Colombo," he read out loud. "Stow away from boilers."

But what made him laugh the loudest was the inscription:

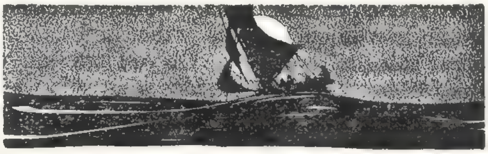
STOW BUNG UP AND BILGE FREE.

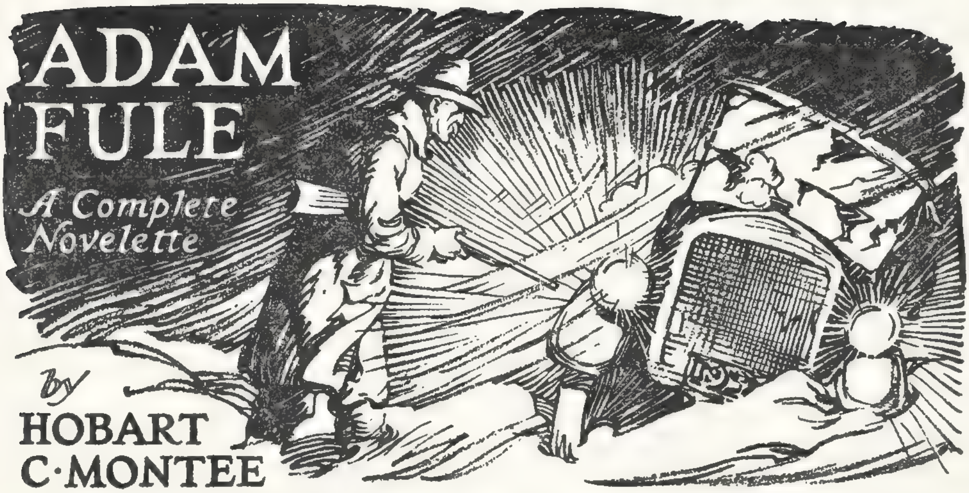
"Who ever heard of a bung hole in a crockery barrel? ——'s bells!" went on the skipper, having his little joke, "I suppose Ali Swat poured you through the bung hole into the barrel. Ha, Ha!"

From motives of diplomacy Grant laughed with him and said—

"Now that the treasure is safe, we will forget that marooning proposition, eh, Captain?"

"No!" thundered the captain. "——'s bells, no! When we make Colombo I will maroon you and your barrel aboard the *West Coyote*, bound to the westward for New York. And I'll tell O'Brien, her skipper, to stow you in the shelter deck, bung up and bilge free. Ha! Ha! Ha!"





ADAM FULE

A Complete Novelette

by

HOBART C·MONTEE

Author of "The Silver Lining," "Prodigal Star," etc.

LEM COLLINS, sheriff from Platte, had called at the Rawlins institution to make another deposit. His deposit was in the form of a dark-visaged, bemustached Greek miner from Sunrise who was under a thirty year sentence behind the bars of the state penitentiary at Rawlins for having stuck eight inches of knife blade into the ribs of a fellow miner. Collins saw the Greek safely into the hands of the checking-in squad, and then returned to the warden's office to get a receipt for this latest addition to his standing account at the institution. Collins had sheriffed for twenty years and in that time had made a good many deposits at Rawlins, some of which still were drawing interest, though by the world forgotten.

The warden and Collins were great friends, the warden's services with the state having begun when the penitentiary buildings were first completed and had few occupants. They two had, so to speak, grown up together with the institution.

He waved Collins to a chair and produced a box of stogies.

"Put your feet on that typewriter desk," he invited cordially. "I know you've got to have them higher than your head to be comfortable. It always did strike me as curious that a man who has spent one half of his life in the saddle with his legs dangling should like to spend the other half sitting on the back of his neck with his feet propped up in the air."

"I guess it's because it lets his blood drain out of his feet back into his gizzard for future usefulness," Collins grinned.

After this the two smoked and silently regarded each other for some time, as friends who have not met for months are wont to do.

To all outward appearances the men were complete opposites. The warden, a large, heavy man, getting heavier by the year for want of sufficient exercise, looked soft. A nearly white Van Dyke beard covered his rather full face, from which a pair of large musk-brown eyes looked out good-humoredly on a world, the horizon of which comprised largely, the gray stone, turreted walls of the penal institution of which he was the head. He had spent the greater part of his life here, and his hobby was the study of human nature; his greatest asset was tolerance for the short-comings of his brother man. He was a man of the indoor world, and looked the part.

Lem Collins was of the outdoor world. His washboard face, burned a brick red by wind and sun, might be either humorous or hard. When the boyish twinkle left his deep-set eyes they became as blue and hard as drill steel. He was small in stature, wiry and slightly stooped from a lifetime spent in the saddle. His trousers, bagging loosely over the tops of the riding boots he habitually wore, concealed somewhat the bow of his nether limbs.

"Do you know anything about this Greek, besides what is in the record, that you think I ought to know?" the warden, asked, breaking the silence.

He always liked to get a line on his man in addition to the information contained in the official record.

"Nope. He's just a plain ore digger s'far far as I know," Collins answered, blowing a cloud of blue smoke ceilingward.

The door to one of the business offices opened behind Collins, and he squirmed around in his chair for a look at the entrant. He saw a tall, good-looking man of perhaps thirty, with a closely knit athletic frame and broad shoulders, dressed in convict garb, bearing a number of what appeared to be account books.

"Come in, Adam," the warden nodded pleasantly.

The convict placed the books on the warden's desk and turned to go. He stopped short at sight of Collins' face and smiled genially.

"Well, well, if it isn't our talkative little old sheriff!" he exclaimed.

The sheriff unhesitatingly put out his hand as he squinted hard into the man's face.

"By golly, your face is familiar, but those clothes sure do make a man look different. I ought to know you. Lemme see——"

"I should say you had ought to know me," the convict said, still smiling. "You pretty nearly put out my light when you slugged me in the lungs with that piece of field artillery you carry."

Collins relaxed his scrutiny and his eyes lighted up. He recognized the convict as a train robber whom he had captured more than two years before. He had been one of a band of three who had baffled the sheriff's office at Cheyenne for several months while they pulled one daylight train holdup after another.

"Oh, I know you now. You are the gent that had a playful habit of holding up express trains; the polite bird who didn't take money from women and kids. You're the guy that turned amateur astronomer a couple of years ago and went in for collectin' stars, sheriff's stars mostly. Yeah, I remember you now, all right."

The convict glanced at the warden and official discipline was relaxed for the moment. The warden was enjoying the crossfire between the two.

"I told you at the time I took your star that I'd see you in Rawlins some time, didn't I?" the convict asked Collins.

"Yes, and I remember of tellin' you that you'd be collectin' stripes pretty soon after you started your star collection," Collins answered.

"We attain the unusual," the convict laughed. "Both parties to an argument are correct."

"Let's see, what was the name? I've sort of forgotten the case. It wasn't tried in my county, you know. What did you get?" Collins pursued more soberly.

"I got life. The name was Adam Fule, but it is a number now." The convict passed lightly over the words as he might have narrated the incidents of a week-end lawn party.

"That name was just a hoax," the warden interrupted. "Everybody knew then and I know it now. But do you know, Lem—" turning to Collins—"I've never been able to find out a blessed thing about this man. He has been a model prisoner, though, and one of the best business heads you ever saw. Adam is sort of business manager of the whole works now.

"He's putting the institution on a business basis, and this year I believe it is going to show a profit for the first time since I came here. But he wasn't ever born with the name Adam Fule."

"It is as good a name as any for this place, isn't it, sir?" the convict inquired. "That is my name when I am on the outside. Just a plain fool."

COLLINS was genuinely interested. "Well, you're traveling the right trail now. If you keep on as Henry says you have been doing your good conduct record might get you a pardon or a parole some day. You might not have to put in your whole time here."

"Oh, I like the place," the convict said lightly. "If I didn't like it I wouldn't stay."

The warden laughed.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there were a good many of our fellows that have the same reason for staying here, Adam."

"I could get out any time I felt like it," the convict said evenly but respectfully.

"I'll bet you a thousand dollars you can't!" the warden exclaimed, letting the forward legs of his chair drop to the floor with a thud. He was serious now. Collins watched the expressions on the two faces, fascinated.

"I will take you up on that, sir," the convict said earnestly. "I will bet you a thousand dollars that I can escape from here within ninety days from any date you may set. It is to be a part of the wager, however, that during the term of the bet the regular routine of the institution is preserved. I am to go about my duties as usual, with the customary freedom and with the customary precautions taken."

"Where would you get the thousand dollars to bet?" the warden asked, still unconvinced that the convict was in earnest.

"I have plenty of money of my own—honest money too—that I can draw on. I didn't take to holding up trains purely for mercenary motives. Life gets too dull for me once in a while and I have to have some excitement."

"Then, by grab, you're on!" The warden pulled a check book from his desk and wrote an order for cash in the amount of a thousand dollars. "Here is my thousand. We'll let Collins here be the stake holder," he said.

"Before I put up the money, I wish to ask one or two assurances," the convict said hesitantly. "I am going to write a check on my bank at home. But before I do so I want the word of honor of both of you that you will not make any effort to learn who I am or who are my family. I can assure you that I am not wanted anywhere in the East. My family is well-known there. Two sisters are happily married and my brother is in politics. I am the only crack-brained one of the lot, the black sheep, and they must not know of my whereabouts.

"I would prefer that the station agent be the stake holder. Mr. Sheriff here would be duty bound to rearrest me when I applied to him for the money and I would not wish to cause him to break his oath of office.

"I will write a check for cash for a thousand dollars and you can put it through your bank for collection. When collection has been made, you will take my thousand and yours to the station agent and tell him it is wager money. For purposes of identification you can take one of my pictures with the prison number blotted out and write a note on the back of it authorizing the agent to pay the money to the bearer if he be the original of that picture. Have the day and night agents initial the note on the back, and instruct them that presentation of the picture and note by me is proof that the wager has been won. If at the end of the wager period I am still here you will take the note and collect the money.

"Is it a bet, on those terms?"

"It sure is," the warden declared. "There has not been an escape from here in ten years, and I claim my system is about escape proof. Go ahead and write your check."

The convict sat at the warden's desk and wrote a check on an eastern bank. The name he signed was "G. Van Saalten Andreus."

"You will find that is good, all right," he said, handing the check to the warden.

Then, turning to Collins—

"I'll leave my card with you when I get out."

"You'd better not," Collins warned. I told you two years ago that as long as you left me alone I'd let you alone. You got in here by getting into my territory, and the lid is off. I'll do what I can to bring you back here even if I have to take another shot at you."

"I think I'll pay you a call anyway," the convict said doggedly.

"Then I'll make you a bet, and winner take all. I'll bet you another thousand dollars that within a week of the time you leave your note you will be back in the jug."

"You are on!" the convict exclaimed. "You leave your thousand with ours. If I collect it, the warden here has already lost his. If you get me you take all three thousand. And if you don't get me, then I win it all. If anything should happen that I don't call on you, then I'll mail your thousand back to you. Is that a go?"

"I'm satisfied," Collins announced. He wrote his check and handed it to the warden.

"Remember, once I am out, the lid is off," the convict warned. "I let you go once when you were after me, when I could have plugged you without any trouble at all. If you push me that close the next time, and I have a chance, I probably will return the compliment you handed me out there west of Cheyenne."

"The lid's off. Look out for yourself, mister," Collins nodded.

They shook hands all around, after which the convict bowed and went out. The sheriff and the warden sat in stilly silence for some time.

"Have another cigar," the warden invited at last. Collins selected one, lighted it and resumed his position with his feet high on the desk before him. Again a silence in which the clock's tick grew loud and laborious.

"Of all the —— fool tricks I ever did, I guess this is the biggest," the warden announced suddenly. "If you weren't just as big a fool as I am, I'd hire you to kick me plumb around the yard."

"I ain't as big a fool," Collins denied, "but I guess I'm a little more concentrated. It sure was a fool stunt for both of us to do. What's more, I've got a hunch that bird is going to keep his word."

The warden bristled.

"By ——, he won't! I'll see to that. But it's my —— foolishness in making a bet like that that makes me mad. Why, if it ever leaked out that I'd made a bet like that with one of the men here,"—the warden never used the word 'convict' in connection with the inmates of his institution—"I'd lose my job in a minute."

"Not only that, but if he makes good and lets the story out, you and me will both be laughed plumb out of creation," Collins added. "I dunno but what we could be prosecuted for aiding and abetting crime, as them lawyer fellows would say. It sure is a —— of a pickle we put ourselves in."

He squinted closely at his friend, some of the habitual good humor coming back into the gray eyes.

"It sort of looks like it was up to you, to keep us both out of a mess. All you've got to do is to keep him in here for three months after a specified date, and collect the money. Of course, you've given your word of honor that you won't take any extra precautions. But you might dress up the guards a little on the pretense that they've been getting a little slack lately."

"I'll see to that!" the warden snapped. "There hasn't been a man that got out of here in the past ten years except through the front gates, and I reckon we can keep up the record for another ninety days or so."

"Let me know when the period of duration starts," Collins said, rising to go. "I'd sort of like to keep track of it."

The more Collins thought of it, the more anxious he became over the matter. If the convict did escape and returned to his practice of robbing express trains, as he probably would, Collins saw himself directly connected with the crimes. The convict would probably have made an attempt at escape some time, Collins reasoned, but he and the warden had supplied the immediate incentive.

If he had had sense enough to keep out of the affair and the convict had escaped, the chances were that he would have gone east somewhere, or at least outside the state. But Collins had deliberately invited the bandit into his country.

He could probably recapture the man, but if some innocent person were killed in the meantime or if he had to shoot the convict in a fight to effect his capture, he, Lem Collins, for twenty and more years a crusader of law and order, would be morally responsible for the blood spilled.

Technically, perhaps, he might not be guilty, but Collins had little patience with technicalities. Many a time he had freed men who might have been technically guilty of a breach of the law, but whom Collins felt sure were morally innocent.

The extent to which his thoughts would drift along this line beyond his control appeared to have no limit. Collins developed a worried look which never for long was banished from his face. He also developed a habit of starting up suddenly from his chair with an exclamation, "Aw ——!" and then would settle back guiltily, glancing around to see if his deputy had noticed him.

"I guess the old man's going loco," Jimmie Dolan, the deputy, confided to the turnkey one day. "He's gettin' so he rears up that way once or twice a day now."

"Somethin' is sure eatin' on him," the turnkey agreed.

AS THE weeks blossomed into a month Collins' case grew worse. By this time he was not so sure that he could catch Fule a second time. The convict was resourceful, quick, clever and had any amount of nerve, as Collins knew from his previous experience with the man. It was possible that he would remain in Collins' territory just long enough to win the thousand dollars, and then pull out for other parts where capture would be more difficult. With his evident education and his appearance the convict would pass in any city without question or suspicion.

Five weeks, and still no word came from the warden. Collins did not know whether the period of the wager had started. It ought not take more than a month to put Fule's check through for collection, he reasoned. Perhaps it had been a bogus check after all. But he had an unfriendly hunch the check would be good, all right. He wondered why the warden had not written him, but second thought told him that if he were in the warden's place he would not want anything concerning the foolish bet put into writing. The same second thought kept him from writing to the warden.

Still, the warden should know that Collins was crazy with suspense. He should know that Collins would want to know what was being done, and ought to be able to find a way to send some word.

When six weeks had passed, Collins could stand the suspense no longer. He made a hurried trip to Rawlins for first hand information.

There he found the warden in much the same frame of mind as himself. Yes, the check had been cashed all right, and the warden had left the money with the station agent as directed. He had written the note and the day and night agents had signed it, but he had not given the note to Fule yet. For one thing, Fule appeared to be in no hurry to have the term of the bet started. He had asked to let the thing lay over until spring. He did not want to have to make his break in the dead of winter. In the second place the warden was not anxious to put the wager into operation. The more he thought of it, the more foolish the whole affair appeared. As a result both he and Fule had been stalling for time.

Collins smoked in silence for some time after the warden had outlined the situation.

"This thing has darned near driven me loco," he announced, breaking the silence. "I'm getting as jumpy as a gun-shy horse, I say let's get the thing started and over with. We can't very well back out of it now. We're into it and we'd might as well see it through. I never went back on my word yet, that I know of, and it seems to be pretty late to start crawfishin' now.

"Darn the cold weather and the stalling. At least that's in our favor, anyway. Fule made the bet and he didn't name any particular time of the year for it to begin. I say, let's call him in and tell him the bet is on from right now. Then if he wants to back out of it we'll give him his money back. That'll let us out sort of easy-like without havin' our faces skinned."

"If I know anything about human nature, Adam won't back out," the warden announced dubiously.

"All right, call him in and let's see."

The convict came in response to the warden's message and stood stiffly just inside the door. He nodded recognition to Collins but did not speak.

"Adam," the warden said slowly, "the sheriff here has been inquiring about the status of our little bet. He thinks the term of the wager should start at once, as long as the money is on deposit. How about it?"

"It is pretty cold weather outside right now," the convict answered. "I thought we were to let it run until spring."

"The trouble is, I've got to be out of the country for a while during the spring and summer," Collins lied. "If you don't want to make it right away, why let it run over until some time late next summer, or else call off my end of it," he added, thinking to make an easy exit through which the other could retreat.

"Of course if you wish to call off your part of it, why it will be all right with me," Fule answered. "Or if it will accommodate your plans, we'll start the term from right now."

"Give him the note, Henry," Collins directed shortly.

"Thanks," said the convict as the warden handed him the note and picture, which he scanned carefully. "Ninety days from today, and it is now two o'clock. This is returnable to you, sir, on the fifteenth of March at two o'clock, if I am still here."

"You sure started it with that talk about backing out," the warden observed when the convict had gone. "Did you notice how he picked you up on that and put the welching at your end of the trail. Well, it's done, anyway."

"Thank —— for that!" Collins exclaimed. "Now that's off my chest maybe I can sleep of nights."

"Let's go over to town and have a drink on the deal," the warden suggested "We haven't had a drink together in so long that I've forgotten what the last liquor you bought me tasted like."

Outside it was so cold that the air seemed still and blue. The thermometer registered below zero temperature and the mercury still was falling. The warden wore a heavy fur coat, and shivered in that. Collins, as usual, wore only his leather vest, long sleeves with knitted wristlets and collar band to prevent entrance of wind, over his woolen shirt. The ground was frozen as hard as rock, but there was no snow.

"Br-rr! I don't wonder that he wanted to wait for warmer weather," Collins shivered into the knitted neckband of his vest. "Even the inside of a jug would appeal to me in this weather."

Together they made the rounds of the drink emporiums, renewing old acquaintances and listening to the range talk on every hand. The liquor, the warmth of the saloons and the congenial companionship everywhere banished the spell that had been on both since the bet was made. At first they treated one another and such acquaintances as happened to be in the room at the time, but before the end of the afternoon they were treating in turns any and all who chanced to be present, and it long had been dark when they started their homeward march, arm in arm and somewhat unsteady.

"'S firs time I've been on a bust since m' brother Gus licked me runnin' for sheriff of Laramie County," Collins announced to the warden. "Sure is a glorious feelin'. ——, it's turned warm!"

"Warm? You're crazy or else you're drunker'n I am," the warden declared. "Look at the frost on those windows! This is the first time I've been red-eyed since you got me drunk last time, and that must be five years ago now."

"I never had yu drunk," Collins denied. "I had yu so's your feet was slippin' once, but the fool bartender was slow and yu sobered up again while he was mixin' the drink. Then I had to start all over again. I guess they'd a' run out of booze that time if I hadn't gone broke first. I never saw yu drunk yet."

So protesting and disputing, they eventually arrived at the gates of the prison walls and were admitted by the surprised and wondering guards. To see the warden tipsy was an event that would take some telling at the mess table.

IT WAS some time toward morning, and the room was chill and dark when Collins felt someone shaking him. It was the warden. He gave Collins a final prod and switched on the light.

"Roll out, Lem," the warden said hoarsely. "The —— is to pay."

It was with an effort that Collins sat up and looked about him. The warden was only partially dressed, his thinning white hair was mussed and his eyes wide.

"Adam Fule has escaped," he said simply when he saw that Collins was awake.

"Hm-m, he didn't lose much time, did he? Are you sure he got away?"

"The men have searched the place from top to bottom. They just now woke me up. It seems Fule told the deputy that he had some statements to make out for me this evening, and would have to work late. There was a light going over his desk all the time, so no one went near him. At midnight when the deputy went to Adam's office it was empty, and they haven't been able to find him. He hasn't been seen since he told the deputy that he'd have to work late."

"Well, there's one sure way to find out if he is out," Collins said, scratching his head. "Telephone to the depot and ask the agent if Fule collected the bet."

"I hadn't thought of that."

The warden hurried to a telephone. In a few moments he was back.

"He collected the money early this evening. It must have been while we were filling up on booze."

"Somethin' always seems to happen when I take a notion to fill up on booze," Collins complained. "Are you going to sound a general alarm."

"No. He has had too much of a start. I'll notify all sheriffs' offices and send 'em his picture."

"I'll bet you a hundred dollars I know where he's headed for," Collins grunted, stamping his feet into his tight boots. "I think I'd better hike for home about as fast as I can get there. You've lost your thousand, Henry, and I'd better be on the lookout or I'll lose mine.

"I hope the darned fool don't go and kill somebody in the mean time."

Collins examined the gun he carried in a shoulder holster under his leather vest.

"Guess I'll go over town and see what I can find out. So long, Henry. When I get wind of that bird I'll drop you a wire."

At the depot he found the agent who had paid the bet.

"I've been wondering all the time what that bet was about," he said to Collins. "I've never been able to find out from the warden, and the fellow that came for the money didn't stay to talk. He produced the note the warden had written and I paid him the money. What time? Oh, I'd say it was about half past six.

"He peeled off a hundred and fifty dollars from the roll and gave it to me for holding the stakes. After he had gone, oh, about an hour, I discovered that my overcoat was missing, and out in the freight room I found someone had taken a pair of overalls that I kept there to wear while handling freight. Then I remembered that the fellow I paid the stakes to was wearing overalls and an overcoat that looked like mine. I guess the hundred and fifty was to pay for them. I sure cussed at first, and then I had to laugh. The coat was sort of old, and I needed a new one anyway. He's sure welcome to it at that price.

"But what I've been trying to figure out ever since is, why the deuce should he steal my overcoat and a pair of old overalls? Who is the bird anyway? Was it just a joke?"

"I dunno who he is," Collins said evasively. "I've met him a couple a' times. Yeah, that bet was a joke on the warden and me, I guess."

Collins took the first train home, but stopped over in Cheyenne to confer with his brother Gus who was sheriff of Laramie county. He told Gus of the convict's escape but said nothing of the wager, and warned Gus that the convict possibly would return to his former pursuits.

At home, Collins stepped off the train into the teeth of an icy northwester that had the bite of the arctic. Gray, sodden clouds scudded hither and yon across the sky and hung in a mass around the summit of Laramie Peak to the west, a sure sign of more wind and possibly of snow. The sheriff smiled grimly. Fule would not be able to hide out for long in this weather, and in case of pursuit the pursuer would have all the advantage. The cold would force the hunted man to seek shelter at some house, in which case Collins would be sure to find him. He was ready, and willing, if the present weather held. It was Adam Fule's move next. Let him come.

ADAM FULE came, but as it was sometime during the wee hours of the morning; Collins was asleep and was unaware of the call until the next morning. It was more than a week after Collins' return from Rawlins, and he had heard no word of the escaped convict. He had begun to wonder if the man had abandoned the idea of calling on him because of the cold weather, when one morning he opened his office door to find a piece of rough paper lying on the floor just inside where someone had pushed it through the crack. Wondering, he picked up the paper and turned it over. On the reverse side a few words had been written in a well-trained hand—

"Adam Fule wishes the sheriff the compliments of the season."

"The son of a gun!" Collins grunted. "He did come, after all!

"Hey Jimmie, c'mere quick! That bird that escaped from Rawlins a couple of weeks ago left a note for us last night."

Jimmie Dolan, who slept in an adjoining room with the turnkey of the jail came running. Collins held out the note.

"Well of all the —— nerve!" Jimmie exclaimed when he had read the note. "The —— sort of wished us a Merry Christmas, didn't he. That was real nice of him. Now where do you s'pose we could find him to wish him a happy return?"

"I dunno. He's probably hiding out somewhere. We'll telephone to everybody we can and warn them to be on the lookout for any stranger. Then you and me'll scout around a bit among the places that haven't got a phone. And don't overlook any vacant houses or barns on your look. You go south today and I'll go north. Then tomorrow you go west and I'll go east. Guess I'll go and warn the depot agents along the line both ways too."

"He sure picked out some —— nice weather to chase a fellow around the country," Dolan grumbled. "I'm —— glad I can do my hikin' in a car though, and don't have to fork no bronc in this weather."

"We'll have to keep in touch with the office here, too," Collins said. "Every time you get where there's a phone, call up. That bird might start playin' with the trains again any time now, and we'd sure be in a —— of a fix if both of us was out scouting around the country out of reach of a phone for the day."

Four days of hard riding in which Collins and his deputy visited most of the ranches, farm houses and homesteaders' shacks within a radius of thirty miles, failed to yield any trace of the escaped convict. From these trips Jimmie Dolan returned to the sheriff's office in the evenings, swearing and cursing escaped convicts in general, frozen roads that tore the rubber off automobile tires, the below zero weather that froze radiators, the biting that chilled him to the bone and the hard luck of being a sheriff's deputy.

"I never saw so many people in my life!" he declared at the end of the fourth day. "People round here will think I'm runnin' for office or sellin' soap or something pretty soon. I've yapped the same lines over and over so many times that I feel like one of them green and blue-headed parrots. I've froze enough skin off'n my face in the last four days to make a saddle out of if it was all tanned.

"I guess that bird musta just dropped that little bilee-do and then hit right out of the country. He sure ain't been in the section I've been in."

Collins smiled. So long as the convict refrained from holding up trains or committing robbery, the game was one of hide and seek. He had a hunch the ex-bandit was in hiding somewhere within striking distance, but had to admit that he had hidden himself well.

"We'll have to hunt in wider circles," Collins said. "I've got a hunch we have got to find him this week or not at all. This weather is not going to last all winter, and ——"

"By ——, I hope not!" Dolan interrupted. "If it lasts more'n a week I'm goin' to Arizony or Mexico or South America, or some of them places that's warm."

"What I mean is that when this cold snap breaks we're going to have some snow," Collins continued. "It's been fixing to storm for about a month, and I've got a hunch that when it does come we're gonna have a snow that we'll remember for a while. Things will probably be tied up for a week or two, and in that time that fellow could get plumb out of the country."

"You're always gettin' cheerful sort of hunches," Dolan protested. "If he wanted to get out, why didn't he git as soon as he left that note for you instead of hangin' around for a week?"

"You never can tell," Collins soliloquized. "Maybe he's waitin' for a good storm to start business in. That's all the more reason for us to find him first."

The cold spell broke late that night, and before morning the snow which Collins had predicted began to fall. It was not the angry, driving kind of storm that makes men and beasts seek shelter, but rather the light and cheerful kind that goes with the Christmas season; large, feathery flakes that settle down like ostrich plumes and stay where they land, that pile up on the cowboys' big sombreros until the men appear to support domes of white upon their heads.

At eight o'clock when Collins made his way to his office the large flakes were falling so thickly that he could not see the length of a town block. The air without was as still as the inside of his office. It was plainly an all day or a two or a three day storm.

"Well Jimmie, I guess we camp at home today," he announced when he had stamped the snow from his feet and adjusted them comfortably on the top of his desk. "No use going out in this."

"Thank —— for that! It'll sure feel good to be able to just sit and smoke and have nothin' else on your mind. A quiet day once in a while does a fella good.

"But speakin' of quiet, this old town sure has been quiet for the last month or two. We haven't done a darned thing since we caught that Greek at Sunrise. Sure is time somethin' busted loose around here."

Collins nodded. "Maybe it will," he said.

"Yeah, I suppose you'll get another one of your hunches and I'll have to get out in the snow after all!"

"Don't get excited Jimmie," Collins laughed. "I haven't got a hunch in the world right now. My mind is sort of taking a rest."

"Thank —— for that!" Jimmie went back to his seven-up game with the turnkey.

DARKNESS came early that evening, and even then there was a foot of snow on the ground and it still was falling. Collins decided not to go to his house that night. Instead, he ate at the restaurant across the street and made a bed in the office. It had been a quiet day with not even a visitor from about town in the office. Collins had caught up on some office work, and Jimmie Dolan and the turnkey had played cards all day.

About eight o'clock the telephone rang. Collins had a premonition of evil when he reached for the instrument to answer.

The call came from the town of Chug, twenty miles down the railway. The general store had been held up just after dark.

A lone bandit had slugged the storekeeper over the head as he was counting the day's receipts, after which he had robbed the safe in the post office, which was located in a corner of the store.

No one had seen the man, and the storekeeper himself could not give a good description of him. He had seen a big fellow in a fur coat walk into the door as he was counting the cash but hadn't paid much attention to him. The next thing he knew was when he had come to, about two hours later, and found the cash from the store and the post office gone. No one knew which way the bandit had gone after the robbery.

Dolan swore softly and steadily as he listened to Collins' grunts and questions at the telephone. He could not hear the other end of the conversation, but Dolan knew it was about something that would take him out into the storm.

Collins hung up the receiver and explained briefly to Dolan what had happened.

"Think we can get down there in a car?" he asked.

"Tin Lizzie will go anywhere as long as this snow stays still and don't roll itself all up in the hollows," Dolan answered. "Ain't this a —— of a night for a guy to start something!"

"Well, let's get going," Collins announced, pulling on his coat. "I dunno what we'll do when we get there, but at least we'll hear all about it and be on hand first thing in the morning."

Collins took two rifles from the rack at the rear of the room, and examined the magazines to be sure that they were full, while Dolan got the car from the garage and drove it around to the office door. Collins was getting into the car when the station agent called to him.

"Hey, wait a minute Lem. I was just bringing you a telegram. —— is turned loose in Sunrise, I guess."

Colllins took the message and went inside to read it, followed by the agent and Dolan.

The message read:

> —— of a fight tonight. Greeks and Japs. Greeks knifed Welkins. I shot the Greek. Both in bad way. Some others cut up some. Situation bad. Looking for big fight any time. Better come up.

It was from the bartender of the Spread Eagle saloon at Sunrise, a friend of Collins'. Welkins, the man who had been knifed, was the town marshal of the mining town over at the eastern edge of the county.

Collins reread the message and silently handed it to Dolan.

"Which job do you want, Jimmie?" he asked. "Looks like we've got to split up our law forces some. Which way do you want to go?"

"Dunno as it makes much difference. Still, it ain't so far to Chug as it is to Sunrise, and I reckon there won't be so much to do when I get there. I guess I'll take Chug," Dolan answered honestly.

"All right. Find out what you can down there tonight, and telegraph to me at the Spread Eagle. If you can pick up any trail in the morning, get some of the boys from there to go with you. But ride up kinda easy on that bird. I remember him from two years ago as a plumb good shot and tricky as ——"

After much explanation and persuasion Collins induced a garage man to drive him to Sunrise. The man argued that a car would be unable to get through the deep snow, but they did, arriving at the Spread Eagle shortly after midnight.

They found Welkins conscious and able to give an account of the fight. The Greek miner who had knifed him was in a bad way. The doctor said he probably would not live out the night. Welkins would recover unless complications set in.

The trouble had started early in the afternoon between the Greek miners from one mine and Japanese diggers from another, over the respective merits of celebrating Christmas and New Years.

The Greeks had started in early to do a fit celebration of the Christian natal day. The Japs had stood back and not only refused to participate in the celebration, but poo-pooed the idea of getting excited over a birthday anniversary.

The New Year was the proper date on which to blow out, they insisted. It marked the beginning of time, and was an anniversary that meant something. Time would always go on, while the man whose birthday the Greeks were getting exercised over was dead and gone.

Welkins had precipitated the fight by attempting to separate the two factions and send them on their way, and the Spread Eagle bartender had gone to Welkins' defense with a double-barreled shotgun and some buckshot.

A body of the Greeks were roaming the street when Collins arrived, looking for some of the Japs, but the latter had withdrawn from town to the safety of their quarters at the mine.

"There don't seem to be anything for me to do," Collins said when he had heard Welkins' story and received corroborative details from the bartender.

"There won't be any more fighting tonight anyway. That Greek will probably die tonight, and that'll save me the trouble of making an arrest. No use arresting any of the other birds. It seems to have been a fair enough fight.

"I'll want you to testify at the inquest after that fellow dies, and I guess that is all there'll be to it."

The bartender nodded. Then he jumped as if he had been stung.

"By grab, I almost forgot! A telegram came for you while you were over talking to Welkins. I put it up here on the cash register so I'd be sure to see it, and then plumb forgot it. Ain't that a —— of a note!"

The message was from Dolan and typical of the deputy. It read:

> Can't find out nothing here. After that hombre left the store he cracked the Bird ranch superintendent on the head and took his Ford. Threw the old man out in the snow and he's about dead. I ran onto him when I went to put Lizzie in garage. Don't guess he'll live. Figger the bird went south from here but don't know. Will try to find out in the morning. JIMMIE.

Collins yawned. "Guess I'll go up and turn in so as to get an early start," he said. "Looks like I might have a plumb busy day of it tomorrow."

"Sure, go ahead. I'll be along in about an hour. Just open the door and walk right in. The latch string is out as usual. You know where to find your room."

THE sheriff always stopped with the bartender when in Sunrise. The bartender lived in a little house some three hundred yards up the slope behind the saloon, and as the nearest path lay through the back yard of the saloon, Collins made his way out back. There had been only a few customers since the fight early in the evening, and when Collins left there was no one in the room but the bartender who was occupied polishing glasses.

He had gone about a hundred yards when he heard a pistol shot. He paused abruptly to listen. A shot, with the town on edge, expecting a fight between the Japs and Greeks might mean anything or nothing at all. He heard no voices or sounds of rioting that would tell him the fight was on again. There was not a sound anywhere about town. It was probably one of the Greeks who had shot off his pistol just to hear the noise, he decided and started on.

He took a few hesitating steps and stopped again. Perhaps that shot had not been as innocent as it sounded. It came from the direction of the saloon—in fact, sounded as if it had been fired in the saloon or right in front of it. Anyway, he decided, he'd better go back and see about it. Then he'd wait for the bartender and they would go to the house together.

Back along the trail he had just made in the fresh snow, he trotted, entered the back door and passed through the now dark card room in the rear to the barroom which was brilliantly alight. There was not a soul in sight. Even the bartender was missing. The shot must have been fired just outside the door and the bartender had gone out to investigate.

Collins ran through the room to the front door, which stood open. As he was about to pass out into the street he heard a scratching sound behind the bar. He turned and peered cautiously over. There, threshing about in a pool of his own blood, was the bartender on his face and attempting to rise. Collins spat a surprised oath and vaulted the bar. He turned the bartender over and examined the wound. He had been shot from behind and the bullet, smashing its way through the lower tip of a shoulder blade, had not come through.

"What the —— happened, Joe?" Collins asked softly. His first thought was that one of the Greeks had come back to revenge his fellow miner whom the bartender had shot earlier in the evening.

"Robbed—didn't give me a chance," the bartender mumbled thickly. "Asked for a drink an' when I turned to get it—shot me. Cleaned the till, I guess."

"Was it a Greek?"

"No, a stranger. Never saw him before. Big fellow—fur coat. Didn't see much of him."

At that instant a car started jerkily somewhere down the street and Collins vaulted over the bar again for a look at it. He arrived at the door in time to see the red tail light winking away as rapidly as the deep snow would permit.

"All right, Joe. I'll get doc over here in a minute. Lay still till he comes. Then I'm after that bird. Here, drink this."

Behind the bar again, he held a bottle of brandy to the wounded man's lips.

Then he dashed to the doctor's house, roused the doctor and told him what had happened, and then raced for the garage where the car that had brought him to Sunrise had been put up for the night.

He dashed through the dimly lighted office, switched on the lights, opened the big doors and had the car out in the street before the sleeping night clerk was aware of what was happening.

The deep gashes which the bandit car had cut through the snow were as easy to follow as a graded highway, and as the other car would be breaking the trail for Collins to follow, he felt certain he could overtake it in a short time. He noted with satisfaction that it had stopped snowing. There was no moon, but a few stars were breaking through the thinning clouds, and these on the newly fallen snow made for visibility.

"That hombre couldn't have had more'n twenty or thirty minutes start," Collins mumbled to himself. "An' I've got a better car than he has. I ought to run over him in a couple of hours."

At a turn in the road, however, Collins discovered that the bandit was not breaking a new trail. He was following what evidently were the tracks he had made coming into Sunrise, but had taken the turn too fast to follow these and had slewed widely. Also, if Collins drove a better car than the bandit, it did not show up as such. On and on the two deep furrows led through the expanse of white, but there was no car in sight.

"Huh!" Collins grunted after a half-hour of furious driving, "That bird evidently swung east from Chug, then north and then back west to the big road. He'll take me plumb back home if I let him run long enough."

He swung into Guernsey through deserted streets. The town was long since in bed and asleep but some late prowler with a car, perhaps a doctor, had been about and his tracks cut into those of the bandit car. Collins had to get out and study the tracks before he could be sure that the bandit had been the later to pass. He noticed then that the temperature was dropping, and that a light breeze had sprung up. Already the light snow was beginning to shift about in fine eddies.

He drove more slowly for the next two miles, until he found where the Guernsey car had turned off into a side road. He got out again and examined the tracks to be sure the bandit had passed straight on. The breeze had freshened into a young wind by this time and the light snow was drifting enough to swirl up in a fine cloud as he bent over the car tracks. It was beginning to drift into the tracks too, and Collins saw that the Guernsey car had been at least a half hour before the bandit.

"I've got to get him within an hour or two," Collins gritted when he made this discovery. "By daylight this'll be a regular blizzard."

WITHIN an hour the snow was driving before a stiff wind in blinding swirls, and Collins had to wipe the windshield constantly with his mittens to keep a spot clear for vision. The tracks of the car ahead already were half filled with the drifting snow. He pushed his own car harder than ever then, feeling certain the bandit would slow down with his lighter car.

Suddenly a dark shape loomed up ahead. Collins threw out the clutch and jammed on his brakes. Even so, he would have hit the thing, had he not swerved sharply aside, and in so doing he kept his own car on the road. The other was the bandit's car, piled up at the side of the road where he had missed the small grade at a turn.

Collins leaped out and ran to the wrecked car. He guessed it had been standing there about thirty minutes. The lights still were burning, and the engine was sizzling hot. The windshield was shattered and the steering wheel broken. Evidently the bandit had been thrown forward through the windshield when the car piled up. Collins looked around quickly for signs of the man's whereabouts. His tracks were plainly discernible, leading from the road up over the hill to the east. Collins ran back to his own car to get his rifle.

"Well hombre, I guess it's a little more'n an even break for me now. Mebbe you can drive a car better'n I can, but I know darned well you ain't a better snow hog. I've been keepin' in practise the last two years while you've been cooped up in Rawlins."

He shed his overcoat—no use keeping that on; it would be warm enough walking—and swung up the hill at an easy stride. No use of running himself down in the first mile, he told himself. This plainly was to be an endurance test, and the sheriff prided himself on his endurance.

Thus daylight found them, Collins shuffling doggedly along, head down, following the tracks of the other who was perhaps a mile, perhaps not so far ahead. Collins carried his rifle loosely in the hollow of his arm, ready. He knew the end of the trail might come at any time on a moment's notice. The wind was roaring down from the west, driving the snow before it in one vast, smothering, enveloping mass. It was queer, Collins reflected, how stuff that had fallen in such soft, feathery flakes could drive like so much sand and grit when it had the push of a strong wind behind it.

He was thankful for one thing: That the storm was at his back. The bandit was drifting before the blast much as a range cow might. Visibility was cut to a few yards, and that was naught but a sweeping, swirling mass of gritty white.

No snow was falling, for overhead, up through the driving snow, he could see a blue sky and a hazy sun, but there was enough drifting on the ground to make old time range men hark back for suitable comparisons.

Soon Collins found the heavy fur coat which the bandit had abandoned. The lining was wet with perspiration which had not yet frozen, and the sheriff knew that he was close on his man.

"He's a gonner now for sure, whether I get him or not," Collins murmured aloud. "His clothes are all wet from having that coat on. Once he sits down now, he won't get up again."

During this time they had been drifting before the storm over rolling, broken country, regardless of the contour of the land. Now they came to a high, rugged ridge which blocked the path, but with little swales running up the side.

Collins read the tracks in the snow where the bandit had tried to ascend one of these swales, but had found the snow too deep. He could see where the man had floundered waist deep for a hundred yards; then he had turned aside and climbed the side of the ridge, swept clean of snow but jagged and forbidding.

The ascent here was almost precipitous, and Collins found his rifle was an encumberance, as he had to use his hands as well as his feet. He kept the weapon, however, and worked his way bit by bit until he reached the top. Here the full force of the wind struck him and all but blew him over.

The top of the cliff, as far as Collins could see, was a rocky table-land. How far it extended in any direction he could not tell, and it was swept bare. There was not a track in sight. Neither was there any sign of the bandit. What little snow there was up there was drifting so rapidly that a track would be wiped out in ten minutes.

Collins stopped and studied a moment.

"Well, he's been driftin' with the wind so far, I reckon it's a good guess he'll keep on that way. I can pick up his tracks again at the other side of this. The snow's bound to be deep there," he soliloquized.

The table-land extended eastward for about a mile, and then dipped abruptly to a valley, all but hidden by the driving snow. Collins dropped below the crest of the ridge to where the snow was piling up in long drifts and searched for tracks. A man would have to wallow through a drift of that size, he knew, and would leave a broad trail.

But there was no such trail. Collins followed along the brow of the hill southward for a half a mile, but found no place where the bandit had crossed. Then he retraced his steps and followed the drifts northward with the same result.

He came up to the brow of the hill and tried to look back across the table-land but his eyes filled quickly with snow and grit and he turned away.

"Brrr!" he shivered. "I wonder where that darned fool went to? After driving down in front of the wind for all this ways it ain't natural that he'd take a quartering course to the wind across this ridge. Maybe he's sat down up there somewhere, or just naturally fell down. I reckon he's a gone goslin' anyway.

"By grab, I reckon I know a little ol' sheriff that's goin' to be a gone goslin' too, if he don't find some shelter pretty soon. Well, it's the valley for you, Mr. Sheriff. I don't reckon there's much chance of findin' a house down there, but it's a cinch there ain't none up here."

He wallowed through the sidehill drifts until he reached the floor of the valley. There he hesitated, pondering which way to go. He decided there would be greater likelihood of finding shelter up or down the valley than by drifting across it with the storm. He took a dollar from his pocket and held it in his hand, turning it over and over with his fingers while he kept his eyes closed.

"Heads up I go north, tails I go south," he said aloud and opened his eyes. It was tails.

He moved out far enough from the base of the ridge to escape the drifts, and followed a course parallel to the bluffs, stopping now and then to listen. This entire country had been homesteaded, he knew, and most of these valleys held one or more homesteaders' shacks. The job was to find one of them.

A mile farther south he suddenly straightened up and shouted joyously. He had come across a narrow ribbon of white winding across the powdered brown expanse of dried grass which showed through the drifting snow. It was plainly a road, the wheel tracks drifted full of the white grit forming two hard, serpentine ridges. While it might be a long road, it must eventually lead somewhere.

He turned eastward again with the storm and followed this road. The snow had drifted into the wheel tracks, so that it was really two ribbons of white, with the brown grass jutting up between. Somewhere along this road would be shelter. He was tired and hungry. He realized that suddenly, and his knees felt tired. In a way he was sorry for the poor —— of a bandit, wherever he was at that moment.

Some dark blotches showed up ahead through the storm. These proved to be some scrub trees that grew along the bank of a small creek. The road turned and followed the course of the stream. Turning around a knob of a hill that jutted out toward the stream, Collins came suddenly on a box-like shack which had served some homesteader for a house.

Farther along and nearer to the creek stood a tiny stable at the back of a barbed wire corral. There was not a sign of life about the place as Collins approached and he decided that the homesteader probably had gone to town to live and work for the winter. But at least it was shelter. There probably would be a stove in there, and he could find something with which to make a fire. He probably would have to forego eating until he made his way back to town.

He found the door on the lee side, protected from the west winds, and ajar. He also noticed that a light skiff of snow had drifted in. He stepped inside the door and stopped for a survey of the nine by twelve interior.

T A FLASH of some dark thing jerked itself upright from in front of the cookstove in a far corner. Collins dropped his rifle to the hip and fired blindly. A vivid streak of red stabbed at him from the darkness of the corner, and Collins fired again. Then he heard something falling softly but heavily, while his ears and the walls of the shack throbbed with the echoes of the shots.

The thing that had fallen did not move. Collins ran forward, his rifle ready. A large man lay on his face on the floor, one of his outstretched, twitching hands still clutching a revolver.

"You darned fool, you oughta know better than try to draw on me like that," Collins admonished, stooping to turn the still form over. He looked at the face and gasped.

"Good ——! It ain't Fule!"

He allowed the limp form to fall back to the floor with a thud while he stared at the upturned face. He had never before seen the man.

"My ——, I wonder if I've done killed a man that hadn't ought to be killed?" he asked aloud.

He put his ear to the chest. The heart within was stilled for all time. The man was dead.

Collins ran his fingers over the body and found where one of his bullets had hit center and low down, while the second had plowed through close to the heart.

Collins stood up and absently wiped the blood from his hand on his own trousers leg. He had killed before this, but he had never before killed an innocent man. He walked nervously around the room and then back to the body where he stopped for a second examination.

He found the man's shirt and leather vest were soaked with perspiration. He searched the pockets and found a considerable quantity of money in bills and coin. Among the bills he found a couple of money orders to the storekeeper in Chug. He straightened up, reassured but puzzled.

"This is the bird that held up Chug and the Spread Eagle all right," he said aloud. "He musta cut diagonal-like across that ridge and hit that road the same as I did. But if this bird pulled the holdups, where the —— is Adam Fule?"

There appeared to be no answer for this question, so he made a further search of the house. There was nothing edible there, but there was an armful of wood in front of the stove and some fresh shavings had been whittled. The bandit evidently had found the wood and had been attempting to start a fire when Collins surprized him.

Collins built a fire, and when the room had warmed up he removed his leather vest and shirt and hung them over the back of a broken chair to dry. Then he sat down with his back to the wall for a short rest. Within three minutes he was asleep.

When he awoke the fire had gone out and the room was chilly. He shivered as he got into his dried garments. He was more tired than ever now and hungry as a wolf. He peeped out of the window to see the storm still raging.

"Well, there's no use staying here and starving to death," he observed. "Guess that road ought to lead somewhere if I follow it long enough."

Before he left he tore a page from his notebook and fastened it into the dead man's shirt. On it he had written—

"A bandit, shot by Sheriff Lem Collins."

"There," he said. "That will be an explanation if anybody should come along before I can send some one after him."

He followed the road back across the valley, head down, butting into the storm. He found that his sleep had done him good, even if it had left his limbs stiff and sore. He judged the time to be past noon. Darkness would come early and if he hoped to live out the night he must find shelter before night.

After following the road for six miles through winding valleys where he wallowed through the soft drifts and followed the road with difficulty, and over barren, wind-swept hills where he sheltered his face from the fury of the storm, he came to the Arrowhead ranch, a large holding nestled among the hills, ten miles off the railroad.

Up to that time he had not had any definite idea of the country he was in. From there on he knew he could follow the road to the Junction almost with his eyes shut.

At the ranch he traded his story for a meal fit for two men, and dried out. But he could not persuade the ranchman to hook up a team and take him to the Junction.

"No, siree, not on a night like this," the ranchman insisted. "I wouldn't take a dog out tonight. You stay over until morning and maybe it'll be clear by then, Then I'll go down and pick up that bird and take you over to the railroad."

"Well, lend me a horse and saddle then," Collins urged. I've got to get that night train, and if you won't lend me a bronc, I'm darned if I don't walk it."

"I'll lend you a horse," the ranchman conceded, "but I'm darned if I'm going out myself. You can leave the horse at the Junction. But you're a plumb —— fool to go anywhere tonight."

"That's all right," Collins grinned. "Go out tomorrow and get that stiff and ship him down to me C.O.D. I've gotta go, that's all there is to it."

It was late when he reached the Junction, but he had to while away two hours while waiting for the midnight train, a two-car affair running down to Cheyenne. Once aboard, he stretched out in a double seat, asked the brakeman to wake him at Wheatland, and went to sleep.

IT SEEMED he had no more than closed his eyes when the brakeman shook him awake.

"All right, Sheriff. Snap out of it. We're in your little old town," the trainman told him.

Collins yawned, rubbed his eyes, and followed the trainman to the platform as the train jolted to a stop. The station platform was dimly lighted, but the lights from the train threw a bright square of light about the car steps. Only one passenger was waiting to get aboard. He swung up the rear car steps as Collins and the brakeman were getting off the smoker. Collins glanced at the man, then looked closer, and then went clawing for his gun.

"Stick 'em up, Fule!" he commanded when he finally got the weapon out after what seemed an interminable age. The other man had a suitcase in his hand and had had no chance to go for a gun, had he wanted to. It was Adam Fule.

Collins stared at Fule, his jaw hanging in surprise, while the brakeman stared, equally surprised at both.

"Well, if this don't beat ——!" Collins exclaimed when he could find his voice. "Where you goin' Fule?"

Fule smiled easily. He had dropped the suitcase and backed against the end of the car, his hands up. Buttoned up in a big overcoat, a fur cap pulled about his ears, he looked little enough like the convict Collins had seen in Rawlins.

"I'm not going any place, Sheriff," he said. "I just came down to meet you."

"Uhuh," Collins grunted. "Well, if you pick up that suitcase sort of easy-like, you can get off and we'll go up to the office to talk it over."

Together they stepped down from the cars and walked up the street toward the sheriff's office, while a wondering brakeman stared after their retreating figures until a sharp whistle from the engine reminded him that the train should be on its way.

At the office Collins called the turnkey and Dolan, who had returned from Chug, to search the prisoner and take his overcoat. After Dolan had taken a gun from a shoulder holster beneath Fule's coat, Collins motioned him to a chair.

"I'm plumb bustin' to hear you say somethin'," he blurted out.

"This is the last day of our bet, Sheriff," Fule said. "I have been in your territory a week today. I slipped a note under your door telling you I had won our bet, but I didn't figure on your being on that train. I guess you win, after all."

"But how'd you get out?" Collins asked.

Fule laughed. "I told the warden I could get out any time I wanted to. I shipped myself out as a case of shoes. It was dead easy. The truck delivered me right at the depot so I wouldn't have to walk far to collect my bet."

"But what have you been doing since? Why didn't you beat it out of the country—go back east and see your folks, or something?"

"I did figure on it, but I had to win your wager first. I wanted to pull a job or two in your territory, just to make it interesting for you, but the weather was all against me. I figured the chances were all yours as long as that cold spell lasted."

Suddenly he grew serious. He leaned forward and when he spoke his voice was earnest.

"Listen, Sheriff. You probably wonder what I'm doing out here when I have money enough to write out a check like I did a while ago and have it cashed. I did want to see the folks, but I knew I wouldn't stay there long. It is too deadly quiet back there—no excitement. I've got a crazy streak in me somewhere that demands excitement. I couldn't find enough any other way, so I hit on the idea of holding up a few trains. I would probably do it again if I were out. I suppose Rawlins is a good place for me. It keeps me out of trouble, and I don't really mind it. The warden is a good old scout."

Collins nodded understandingly. "Yeah, I guess some of 'em are built that way. But there's one more thing I'd like to know. Where the —— have you been keepin' yourself since you left that first note for me? Jimmie and I combed the whole darned country lookin' for you."

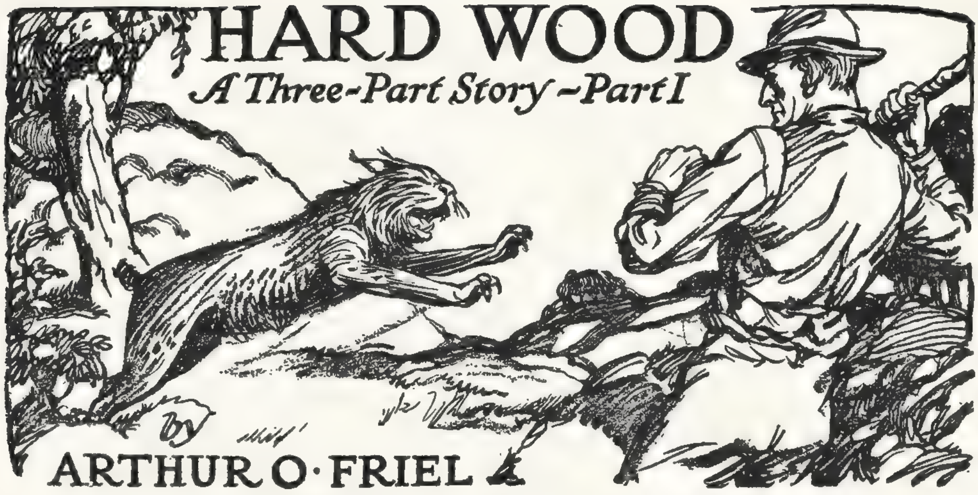
Fule laughed, the devil-may-care gleam coming back into his eyes.

"I've been a law abiding citizen, Mr. Sheriff. I was right down here at the hotel all the time, a well-to-do land buyer looking for some good real estate. The weather was so cold that I had a good excuse for remaining indoors, and I spent most of my time in my room.

"I watched you come and go almost every day from my window, and I figured that as soon as the weather broke, if it did within my week here, I would pull off a good job to keep you interested. But luck was against me, so I just laid low. I figured that you would look every place except in town for me. You will find at the hotel that Mr. Andrews stopped there a week, and checked out for the night train tonight."

"Adam Fule," Collins turned the words over softly. "In some ways I guess you are all right, and in some ways you ain't so much as you might be. Well, tomorrow we'll just go sort of quiet-like up to see the warden and nobody here will know the difference.

"One thing is sure. You ain't the only —— fool in this country!"



HARD WOOD

A Three-Part Story—Part I

by

ARTHUR O. FRIEL

Author of "Cat O'Mountain," "Mountains of Mystery," Etc.

CHAPTER I

THE WAR-NAME

"HARD WOOD" won his war-name on the golden October afternoon when he thrashed "Copperhead."

It was bestowed on him, that name, during a halt in hostilities enforced by Steve Oaks, an older and deadlier fighter than he. It was given by Steve himself, whose twinkling brown eyes belied the harshness of his mouth as he spoke. It stuck to him as immediately and persistently as a burdock, and he made no effort to shake it off. Indeed, he accepted it with pride—and he lived up to it.

Copperhead, too, was rechristened that afternoon. Like his conqueror, he took his new name from the lips of a fighter. But the lips were those of Hard Wood himself—lips swollen and reddened by fist-blows—and the epithet was spat at him in hatred and scorn. He writhed under it, as well he might; for in all the length of the Shawangunk mountains no creature is loathed more than that hideous spotted reptile which strikes without warning. But the sobriquet, once fastened on him, stayed with him. So, being Copperhead by name and copperhead by nature, he also lived up to it.

The sun of that day was rolling low toward the Minnewaska cliffs when Oaks came trudging up the winding hill road of that crag-bound bowl among the New York hills which, ever since the ambush-fighting Indian days, had been known as "The Traps." In his right fist swayed a shotgun, and from his left dangled a brace of grouse. In the brush fringing the sandy wheel track sounded only the drowsy drone of katydids and crickets, and the road ahead seemed empty of all life. But then, from around the sharp turn where squatted the weather-beaten little schoolhouse, shrill voices broke into the peaceful chorus.

"Rassle him down, Harry!"

"Look out! Don't let him bite ye!"

"Use yer knees onto him!"

"Oh, gosh, he's gougin'! He's gougin'!"

The advancing man glanced at the westering sun, which was well below its four-o'clock station in the sky; listened again, grinned, and quickened his pace to a lope. A couple of minutes later he entered the schoolyard and joined the tense little knot of youngsters witnessing the combat.

Down on the rock-studded ground, a black-haired and a red-headed boy were fighting with the ferocity of catamounts. Wrestling, wrenching, kicking, clawing and battering, they battled in the rough-and-tumble style of the backwoods, which knows no rules except the world-old maxim, "Git the other feller and git him good!"

Over and over they rolled, heaving each other about, shooting hard fists into face or body, with such rapidity that the hunter could catch only fleeting glimpses of their faces. He made no move to interfere. With the younger spectators whooping useless advice, the duel went on until it paused from sheer exhaustion.

"Hard Wood," copyright, 1925, by Arthur O. Friel

Then, while the antagonists lay clinching and gasping, the man had a brief opportunity to study them. On the red-haired, bull-necked youngster his eye rested only an instant, and he nodded slightly in recognition. But as he scanned the slender boy with the black hair and the high cheekbones he frowned as if puzzled.

"Red-Top's one o' the Cooper kids," he told himself. "But who's this here wild Injun?"

Before he had time to voice the question the fight was renewed. With cat-like quickness, he of the raven hair twisted himself partly free and snapped two left-handed blows into his opponent's mouth. The other snarled and jolted savagely upward with one knee. Then he drove an elbow into his foe's neck, squirmed upward, gained his footing, and kicked viciously for the stomach.

But the slender lad, either instinctively or accidentally, had rolled over backward, and the copper-toed boot missed him. While it was still in air he snatched at it, caught it, yanked and twisted, and bore the red-headed one thumping to earth again. Then, so swiftly that he seemed to shoot through the air, he was on the other's body and had clamped him to the ground.

Red-Top was down to stay. Flat on his back he was, with arms pinioned by the victor's knees. His own legs were useless, for his opponent was straddling him high on the body, where neither kicks nor knee-thumps could be effective. And now, his bruised face hard as ironwood, the conqueror began merciless punishment.

Rapidly, unceasingly, he hammered both fists down into the red face which sought to turn itself aside or sink itself turtlewise into the thick shoulders below it. And with each blow he rose on his knees to give more weight to the downward smash. It was grim, cruel work, but no lust of cruelty showed in the face of the boy on top. His expression was, rather, that of a ruthless avenger—hard, cold, implacable. The regularity of his blows and the sway of his body seemed almost mechanical, as if he were an engine of retribution which must pound the thing below it into pulp.

Something of this feeling crept into the minds of the watching boys around them, who now were stricken silent. The man, too, quietly laid his gun and birds on the ground. As he did so, one of the schoolboys, unable longer to endure the strain, shrilled:

"Oh, gosh, he'll kill him! He's killin' him now!"

Steve Oaks stepped forward, gripped the conqueror's shoulders, swung him bodily up off the battered Cooper.

"That's 'nough!" he said tersely, loosing his hold.

Instantly the boy whirled and struck. Steve had to move lightning fast to block the blow. A split-second later another savage punch was fended aside. Then Oaks caught a wrist and a forearm and held them.

"Ye catamount!" he grunted. "I said that's 'nough!"

"Lemme loose, consarn ye!" gritted the boy. "Leggo!"

Furiously he strained to free himself. As he found his efforts futile, his black eyes flamed. He kicked Steve in the shins and snapped his strong young teeth at one of the sinewy hands holding him. Steve grunted again and his mouth narrowed. With a couple of wide strides he forced the boy's legs between his own and clamped them there by a knee-grip.

"Might's well ca'm down," he warned. "What ye maulin' him fer? Who be ye?"

"None yer business! Lemme loose an' I'll lick ye, ye big bully!"

"Awright. Ye'll stay right where ye be till ye answer me."

Holding his grips, Oaks lifted his head and glanced at Cooper, who was sitting up and dazedly pawing at his face. Then he looked inquiringly at the other boys. One of them vouchsafed information:

"He's Harry Wood—that new boy that come here lately, Steve. Come from over west somewheres. Him an' Coop was fightin' 'bout Harry's mother."

As his name was spoken, Steve felt the resistance of Harry Wood slacken a bit. Looking down, he found the black eyes burning into his own.

"Steve?" his captive asked sharply. "Steve who? Ye ain't one o' them Cooper tribe?"

"Nope. Steve Oaks."

The boy looked startled.

"Steve Oaks? Gorry! The feller that kilt 'Snake' Sanders? You him?"

"Yep."

Boy and man probed each other with unwavering gaze for a long minute. Then:

"Reckon I can't lick ye yit, Steve—not till I git growed bigger. I'll thank ye to leave me go."

A faint smile quirked Steve's set lips.

"When ye git bigger ye'll maul me, hey? I'll be a-waitin' any time ye're ready." He relaxed his grip. Then his eye fell again on Cooper. "What ye killin' him fer?" he demanded.

"Him!" Harry's face darkened again. "He ain't even licked yit. He can set up, can't he?"

"Huh! Your idee is to pound 'em till they can't move," chuckled Steve. "Ye're hard, Hard Wood."

"I've heard tell that Oaks was kind o' hard wood too," retorted the lad.

He stepped toward Cooper. The latter lurched to his feet.

"Ye dirty-mouthed snake!" grated young Wood. "Ye yeller-bellied copperhead! Ye got to eat what ye said or I'll muckle onto ye ag'in! Hurry up!"

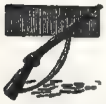
Steve, watching Cooper, admitted to himself that the epithets fitted. Like the snake, Cooper was thick-bodied. His hair was a dull, coppery red. His face had a reptilian flatness, and his swollen eyes held a venomous glint as they centered on Hard Wood.

"Ye ain't got no right to say nothin' like that even if 'twas so," continued the victor, his voice vibrant. "An' 'tain't so. My mother *was* married! The s'tificate is framed an' hangs on to the bedroom wall, with the names an' dates an' everything. Now eat what ye said!"

His fists curled and lifted as he spoke. Steve, suddenly perceiving the cause of the fight, wished he had not interfered. His face hardened. And Copperhead, catching his chill stare, realized that his rescuer would not again save him. As Hard Wood took a purposeful step toward him he quailed.

"I—I didn't mean nothin'," he mumbled. "Yer mother's a—a nice woman."

"Awright. But ye ever open yer head about her ag'in—good or bad—an' I'll jest about kill ye. Now git out!"



HARRY WOOD was young, and at that point he made a mistake. He turned his back contemptuously on his enemy. The enemy also turned away, sullenly—and spied Steve's shotgun on the ground. With a sudden spring he snatched up the weapon and swung the twin muzzles to an aim at Harry's receding back. Then he pulled both triggers.

The gun, though loaded, did not respond. Unlike the usual Traps arm, it was hammerless, and its safety-catch was on, locking it against discharge. Copperhead knew nothing about such requirements of gunnery. For an instant he stood frozen, staring down at the balky weapon. Then, muttering something that sounded like an oath, he dropped it and ran.

In the same instant Harry and Steve leaped after him. Young Wood, lighter and a shade quicker, led the man by a scant yard. Steve had to cramp his stride or collide with him.

"Git outen the way!" he snapped.

"Lemme git him!" gritted the boy.

Steve slowed.

"Awright," he acquiesced. "Git him an' git him good!"

Wood did. Within ten yards he had run down his quarry. Diving headforemost at the thick neck ahead, he darted an arm around it and yanked Copperhead sprawling backward in the road. A brief struggle, and again Copperhead was underneath. Forthwith retribution recommenced. And this time Steve, towering grimly over the two, did not intervene.

Soon Copperhead was begging for mercy. He received none. He broke into hoarse screams. These diminished into broken groans. The groans in turn grew faint, sank into dull whines. And when young Wood paused for breath and then slowly arose, the beaten boy no longer even whined. He lay inert.

"Guess he's licked now," panted Harry, scanning him judicially. "Can't soak him no more, anyway—my arms are tired an' my hands hurt. I'll call him licked."

Steve looked thoughtfully at his lean, high-cheeked profile and then at the mauled face of Copperhead.

"So'll I," he dryly agreed.

Stepping to the side of the road, he dipped up a hatful of water from a tiny brooklet and deluged Cooper's head. A second hatful was necessary before that head moved and its owner strove to rise.

Nobody gave him a helping hand, and he slowly crawled up unassisted. Under lids bloated almost shut he peered around him. Without a word he stumbled away toward the turn of the road, whence he would descend the hill to a wagon track alongside gurgling Coxing Kill and follow it through the brush to the Cooper clearing away back in the Traps.

When he had lurched out of sight the

boys looked at one another and grinned in sudden relief from tension. Steve again studied Harry. The latter stooped beside the brooklet and thoroughly washed hands, face and neck.

"Be I cut up much?" he asked when he arose.

"Nope. Fussy 'bout yer looks?" Steve twitted.

The black eyes stabbed straight into the brown ones. Across them flickered a hot light. Then they hardened and turned cold.

"Yep."

He turned and stalked down the road.

"Wait a minute. Got to git my gun." Steve lounged after him. "Lemme tell ye somethin'. Don't never turn yer back onto a feller ye've jest licked."

Harry nodded, and his hard mouth softened. Steve Oaks, of the formidable reputation, was treating him as a fellow-fighter. The rankle of the jest concerning his looks died.

"Wouldn't of done it if I'd knowed there was a gun 'round," he explained. "I was busy when ye come, an' I didn't see yer gun."

They walked on to the schoolyard, where they paused.

"Ye asked me jest now, was I fussy 'bout my looks," vouchsafed Harry. "I don't care nothin' 'bout myself, but I've got to be careful 'bout mother. If she see blood onto me she'd go all to pieces. My pop, he got his head blowed 'most off last fall when he was a-huntin', an'—wal, ye know how women is."

"Uh-huh." Steve nodded gravely. "Where was ye then?"

"Over into the Big Injun country—'way onto the west end of Ulster County. I was borned there. So was my pop and gran'pop. But mother's folks come from 'round here, an' she didn't like Big Injun much, an' with pop dead—wal, we up an' moved. Now I've got to git home an' do the chores. G'by."

"Jest a minute." Steve stepped over to his birds. "Mebbe yer mother'd like a pa'tridge for dinner tomorrer."

For the first time Harry smiled. The smile transformed his somber face.

"I thank ye kindly," he acknowledged. "Mother does like pa'tridge mighty well, an' I don't git much time for huntin' these days."

He took the plump bird, appraised it with practised eye, looked a moment at Steve. Then he went on:

"Ye give me a name awhile ago—Hard Wood. That means somethin', comin' from you to me. Folks say ye're pretty hard yerself when ye git a-goin'. I've got some Injun blood into me; my gran'pop was 'bout half Injun. I've heard pop tell that the Injuns had different names: Some was dream-names an' some was war-names, an' so on. I s'pose the fellers 'round here will call me Hard Wood now, an' that ain't no dream-name. Seein' who started it, I'll let it stick."

"Awright. But don't bully the little fellers to keep up yer name."

"I never fight nobody without he ought to be fit," asserted Hard Wood. "Then I make him know he's been fit with."

Steve chuckled.

"Where d'ye go from here?" he asked.

"Down toward the Clove. I go up this woods path here an' cut 'crost the Van Hooven place. Gits me home quickest. Wal, g'by."

He turned, plodded his way into the wood-road, and was gone.

Steve looked after him, picked up his gun and the remaining bird, and resumed his own way. And as he went he alternately chuckled and scowled, knowing that young Hard Wood's vengeance upon the defamer of his mother would result in the virulent enmity of the entire Cooper "tribe"—a family known to be "p'ison mean."

CHAPTER II

THE DEADLINE

HARD WOOD himself never knew all the results of his first fight in the Traps. Nor did he ever realize how fortunate was the chance arrival of Steve Oaks during the progress of that fight.

He did not know, for instance, that the saturnine Steve discussed his affairs at the supper-table that day with his only real friend—"Uncle Eb" Wilham, a fearless, whole-souled old fellow, with whom he lived. Nor did he know that thereafter Steve walked down to the junction of the road and the Cooper path, where he presently intercepted two of the older Cooper brothers and intimated that any excursion in the direction of the Wood home might prove exceedingly unhealthful. Yet such was the case. And, since no two men in all the Traps cared to antagonize Steve Oaks, the beetle-browed Coopers were at pains to declare that they were only going coon hunting and to turn their steps east, toward the Gap, instead of north, toward the Clove.

Neither did Harry ever suspect that the friendship which presently developed with Uncle Eb and Steve was at all due to his fierce defence of his mother. It seemed to come about casually, and he accepted it in the same way. Uncle Eb he already knew by sight, as the vigorous old man drove weekly down the Clove road en route to the village of High Falls for mail and supplies; and when the white horse formed the habit of stopping half an hour at the Wood dooryard while his master joked explosively with the slow-smiling young widow, neither boy nor mother realized that the caller was making sure that all was well with them.

Steve, who was a born hunter, drifted past the schoolhouse from time to time with small game; nodded to him, talked briefly about nothing in particular, and gave him squirrels or rabbits or birds "for yer mother." It never entered Harry's head that his schoolmates duly reported these occurrences to their families, which thereafter bore in mind the fact that the redoubtable Steve was a friend of the Woods.

Nor, to his credit be it said, did he realize that his own fighting ability now was feared by all his schoolmates. He noted, of course, that there were no further attempts to "pick on to" him; but he did not know that his terrific thrashing of Copperhead had virtually "licked" all the other boys as well. In his own Big Indian country—at that time a turbulent lumbering section—men fought to an absolute finish; and in finishing Copperhead he had merely followed the Big Indian code. The Traps boys themselves were tough little fighters, but they never had seen such thoroughly conclusive work as that of the lad from "over west," and now they had no desire to undergo similar treatment. Yet their sturdy pride forbade any subservience, and they gave Harry no hint that he was virtually cock-of-the-walk at school. Since the self-reliant young battler himself was not of a bullying temperament, he sought no sign of fear in his fellows, and thus found none.

The only indication of his change in status in their minds was his new nickname, which they fastened firmly on him at his next appearance.

"'Lo, Hard Wood!" chorused the youngsters that morning, meanwhile watching sharply to see whether the name would "mad" him.

"'Lo, soft pines," he retorted, with a slight smile.

Finding him not averse to the sobriquet, the boys forthwith whooped at him the names of all local hardwoods which occurred to them.

"'Lo, Ironwood!"

"'Lo, Hickory!"

"'Lo, Maple!"

Oak, cherry, pepperidge—they named him all of them. At the last he frowned.

"Don't call me Pep'ridge," he warned. "Pep'ridge is hard, but it's mean wood an' 'tain't no good. Nor don't call me no other names but Hard. That name was give me by a real man, an' I'll wear it."

A momentary silence ensued. When the boys spoke to him again they used the name he had specified. And "Hard" he was from that day.

Copperhead did not fare so well. For several days he did not reappear at all; and when, with face still disfigured, he came sullenly plodding into the schoolyard, he found his reception decidedly uncordial. Boys and girls alike eyed him in sour silence. Then somebody jeered—

"Copperhead!"

Others echoed the odious name in a crescendo of contempt. Maddened, he lunged at a boy smaller than himself—and collided with the tough fists of that boy's older brother. The ensuing combat had hardly begun when it was cut short by the schoolmaster.

That worthy gentleman, whose pedagogical qualifications consisted mainly of ability to make small sums add up right and to swing a wicked harness strap, popped through the doorway and proceeded forthwith to exercise the aforesaid strap in the interest of order. He had, of course, heard of Copperhead's recent attempt to shoot young Wood in the back, and the few blows which now fell on Copperhead's present antagonist were merely pattering raindrops compared to the storm which broke on the thick-bodied aggressor. When his wiry right arm was tired, the teacher gave the blubbering red head a shake that made his teeth rattle, turned him toward the road, and gave him a final shove and a final dismissal.

"Git outen this yard and stay out!" he panted. "This fightin' on school grounds has got to stop, and you're the brat that's started most o' the fightin'. Ye're p'ison mean, like the rest o' yer family—'ceptin' yer mother—and I won't have ye here no more. Start yer boots!"

Copperhead went. Not a jeer followed him, for the irate old despot had swung a bleak eye toward his flock, and all knew the sting of that strap.

At his command, the others filed into the schoolhouse and took their seats for the morning session. Quiet had just settled when a window crashed.

Pane after pane flew apart, smashed by stones hurled with vicious fury from the road. Pandemonium filled the room. Amid the shattering of glass, the clatter of bouncing stones, and the shrill screams of hurt or frightened girls, the schoolmaster and the boys rushed for the door. They found the road empty. The stone-thrower had vanished, snake-like, into the nearby brush and made good his escape.

Thus ended Copperhead's schooling, and thus another drop of venom entered his blood. Not that the loss of school privileges was at all unwelcome to him; he attended only because compelled to do so by his mother, and what studying he did was actuated by fear of the master's strap. But the final castigation, the mocking grins of the other boys while he writhed under it, the loathsome name they had given him—these were gall and wormwood, embittering all the more his black hatred for the boy who had first thrashed him in that schoolyard. But he did not yet strike back at that boy. He waited to catch him unawares.

SMOOTHLY, peacefully, the October days glided past, and Hard Wood swung back and forth in his orbit. From home to school, and from school to home. As man of the house, he was far too busy at present to deviate from his direct route and his fixed duties. Yet, from the tongues of his fellows, he learned more about those in whom he was most interested than if he had been at liberty to go visiting. These were the Coopers and his friends up the road.

The Coopers, he heard, numbered seven: "Old" Bill and Mis' Cooper, the father and mother, "Young" Bill, also known as "Bad" Bill, Joe, Jed, and Jerry, the last-named being Copperhead, and the one girl, Jane. Old Bill and all his sons were a surly, thick set, red headed, vicious breed, who drank and fought among themselves, had little to do with any one else, never worked off their own rocky land, yet seemed always able to buy whatever they needed. The mother, now faded and gaunt, had been a fair-haired and attractive young woman from "down Granite way," and the girl Jane was said to "take after" her. But nobody knew much about Jane, for she had never gone to school. She was blind.

The Cooper place was said to be far back, and almost under the steep six-hundred-foot slope on whose summit lay the odd little Lake Minnewaska. The only work in which its owners were known to engage was that of charcoal burning. From time to time Old Bill or Joe drove a wagon-load of charcoal down into the Wallkill Valley and, presumably, sold it at some Hudson River town at the east. Bad Bill and the others never left the hills; the former because, for some unstated reason, he was bashful about meeting police officers, and the others because they would or could not.

As for the others, Uncle Eb was spoken of with affection and Steve Oaks with awe. Steve was characterized by the boys as "a kind of an Injun, wild like a wolf." It was whispered that his father had disappeared before his birth, his mother had become "queer into the head," and he had been born in the woods, not in a house. Then the mother had died, and he had grown up as a waif of the hills. Now he was a swarthy, taciturn, hard-jawed young man who acknowledged attachment to only one person, Uncle Eb, and who spent much of his time in the woods, earning a passable living by his gun and his knowledge of honey-trees. His enmity, once aroused, was known to be implacable. He fought, not with fists, but with buckshot. And he had killed his man.

Of this killing Harry had heard before meeting Steve; and he knew it to be a well-merited vengeance on a murderous malefactor. At the same time, it gave the avenger a sinister reputation in the community. Yet, the more the boy learned about the killer, the better he liked him. Something about the wolfish woods-wanderer appealed to him.

This feeling grew much stronger before the month was out. As has been said, it was the month of October; and as the falling of the leaves opened up short vistas in the dense hardwoods, the bang of muzzle-loading guns became more frequent. Every explosion, every echo rolling and roaring among the crags, goaded the boy's hunting instincts. At length, on a Saturday when he had sawed stovewood for hours, he could no longer stand the strain.

"Goin' a-walkin', Mom," he briefly announced. "I'll git back 'fore dark."

His mother, busy at sewing, cast a glance at the well-filled woodbox and nodded a perfunctory assent. In his little bedroom he quietly slid his dead father's long double barrelled gun through the window and concealed powder-flask and shot-pouch and cap-box in his pockets. Then he strolled out, got the gun, and headed into the woods.

An hour or two later, with a rabbit slung down his back, he emerged from a wood-path and found himself at the road near the schoolhouse. Beyond, open pasture-land dipped to the bed of Coxing Kill; and across the stream he caught a brief glimpse of a flying grouse. Marking the spot where the bird disappeared, he scrambled over a wall, loped to the creek, crossed on stones, and stole along another path toward the covert of his quarry.

The bird was wild and wise. Twice it hurtled up and away in brush so thick that he had no chance for a shot. The second time, after a short flight, it swerved across the stream, vanishing in scrub on the farther shore. The boy followed with silent persistence.

As he recrossed the rushing water, a loose stone tilted under foot. He lost balance, slipped in up to the waist, and dropped his gun. It fell between two stones, lodging about a foot below the surface. Raging, he retrieved it and swashed on shoreward. Then, from the brushy bank behind, broke a howl of malicious mirth.

There, half concealed, stood Copperhead and a heavier, older youth of vicious expression and Cooper features—Bad Bill. Both were laughing in a sneering way which stung worse than verbal vituperation. Yet they laughed only with their mouths; their eyes held a cold, evil light. Through the leaves, hip-high, glinted the gray steel of gun barrels.

"Haw haw haw!" jeered Bad Bill. "Shotgun, whar ye goin' with that boy? Baby ain't learnt to walk yit! Does yer momma know ye're out? C'm'ere an' gimme that gun. Jerry here 'll give ye suthin' for it. Yas, he'll give it to ye with both hands. C'm'ere!"

"S'posin' ye come an' take it away from me," retorted Hard Wood, his voice level. "The two o' ye together. That there copperhead with ye don't dast to try it alone."

Copperhead snarled, and his gun moved.

"Yah! I'll fix ye!" he yelled. "Hard Wood, hey? We make charcoal outen hard wood! We got ye now, an' when we got through with ye ye'll look wuss'n that pop o' yourn when he got drunk an' kilt hisself."

"Ye dirty liar!" flared Harry. "Keep yer rotten tongue offen my pop! He warn't no swillin' pig of a Cooper, always drunk an' dirty! Copperhead, ye——"

"Shet up!" bellowed Bad Bill.

His grin was gone and his face reddening with rage. For a minute he cursed foully. Then his tobacco-yellowed teeth grinned again in a grimace more malevolent than that of a snarling panther.

"Jest like yer father!" he called, gloating on a new thought. "He went a-huntin' an' fell down an' got shot, 'cordin' to what I hear. Ye're a-huntin' an' ye fell down like him. We kin fix the shootin' part of it——"

His gun lifted. But it stopped abruptly. His eyes seemed to rest on something above his victim. Copperhead, too, looked blank. There was a tense silence.

The gun sank. Bad Bill swallowed. Once more he grinned—a sickly grin. His color had faded, and when he spoke again it was in a husky tone.

"Ye ain't scairt, hey? Wal, awright. But lemme tell ye suthin'. Ye ain't got no business sneakin' 'round up here. Ye live into the Clove. Ye stay thar! Fust time we ketch ye this side o' the road ag'in, ther' won't be no foolin'. This here kentry's ourn, an' ye keep outen it. C'm'on, Jerry."

And Copperhead faded back into the brush with him, saying not a word.

For a minute Hard Wood stared after them, bewildered by their unexplainable change of front. Then, with sudden energy, he sprang ashore and worked swiftly to draw his wet charges. With the barrels swabbed dry and new loads rammed home, he started back across the creek.

A drawling voice halted him.

"I'd leave 'em go, Hard."

The words came from behind and above him. Facing about, he discovered the reason for the withdrawal of the Coopers. At the top of the bank stood a sizable pine, and against the pine lounged Steve Oaks.

The boy wavered. Then his mouth hardened. He resumed his way, mounted the farther bank, and looked for his enemies. They had gone.

Retracing his steps, he found Steve still leaning carelessly against his tree, shotgun dangling beside one leg. Steve said nothing. His deep-set brown eyes dwelt on the youngster's, noting the hard glitter in their depths. The ghost of a smile passed across his set mouth and was gone. After a wordless minute or two he lazily straightened up.

"Yer pa'tridge is over yender into that hickory," he said, moving his head sidewise. "Thinks he's hid."

The other followed the motion, and, after a moment's keen scrutiny, detected the bird crouching in fancied security. The gun rose, froze, kicked back. The grouse tumbled and was still. Steve, who had watched the handling of the weapon, nodded approvingly. The two walked to the fallen bird.

"'Bliged to ye," said Harry.

A short headshake refused gratitude. Steve knew well that the boy thanked him for standing at his back in peril, rather than for pointing out his game. And Hard Wood knew well how deadly his peril had been. But neither spoke further of it.

Returning to the pine, Steve picked up his own game—several birds—glanced at the sun, and moved roadward. A little later the pair stood in the sandy highway. There Steve spoke again:

"Folks is funny. Some likes to git visited; some don't. Them Cooperses don't. Nobody goes nigh 'em much. Course, a feller's got a right to go where he wants to. But if I had a mother a-livin' an' some fellers drawed a kind of a deadline, I dunno as I'd go a couple o' miles outen my way to git acrost it; 'specially if they kep' onto their own side o' the line an' they didn't have nothin' I wanted. A shotgun don't care who it kills, an' some mothers needs their boys powerful bad. G'by, Hard."

"G'by, Steve."

They parted. Harry went home, thinking deep; and for a long time that brief talk echoed in his memory. And, because of it, he remained thereafter on his own side of the deadline drawn by the Coopers—until his mother no longer needed him.

CHAPTER III

CHICKADEES

FOUR winters turned the Traps into a bowl of icy stones and naked trees, and three summers transformed it back into a gulf of greenery. The fourth summer still was weeks in the future when into the Wood home stalked the dread specter of the hills: Pneumonia. Around the lungs of Mis' Wood it wrapped its lethal fingers in a clutch which never relaxed.

Dumb, dazed, the son she left behind her sat at the bedside and stared fixedly at the wan face which never again would brighten at his home coming. Despite the fact that no hope had been extended by the doctor summoned from High Falls, despite the funereal air with which neighboring women had come visiting during the past few days, Hard Wood had doggedly rejected every suggestion that his mother would not recover. And now she was gone.

The Hard Wood who today loomed in the low chair was not the slim schoolboy who had thrashed Copperhead. Although still only a youth in years, he was a man in stature and in feature. At nineteen, he was already acquiring the slight stoop often seen in tall men; and his shoulders had widened so far that, in passing through a doorway, he unconsciously stepped with a sidling motion. Nor were those shoulders angular with scantily fleshed bones. They were padded with muscles as hard as his name, built up through three years of steady toil with sledge and chisel. Since quitting school he had labored at millstone quarrying.

Hard work, hard rock, and hard years had hardened also the face and the reputation of Hard Wood. The face had not grown coarse; it was clean and strong. But the stern jaw, the tight mouth, the lean cheeks, the slitted eyes and straight brows, might well have been carved from cold flint. Only his mother knew how that forbidding countenance could melt and how the challenging eyes could soften. To all the rest of his world he turned a bleak countenance, and to all but two, Steve Oaks and Uncle

Eb, his sledge-hammer fists were an ever-ready menace. Hence his reputation.

The reputation was earned. More than one man carried on his face scars left by those merciless fists; each a man, older than Wood, who had taken the youngster too lightly and tried to bully him. There was also one who, because of offense against Mis' Wood, would end his days as a cripple. There were even women who had felt the stinging weight of Hard Wood's hands and the terror of his ferocious wrath.

Like every other community, the Traps had its quota of mean-minded men and of snake-tongued women. It was one of the former who had suffered the full force of Hard Wood's fury, and two of the latter who had received nerve shocks never to be forgotten. The man had attempted to pay court to the widow, who still was in her mid-thirties and not unattractive. Repulsed, he had taken revenge by circulating slanders so vile as to be understandable only by habitual foul-thinkers. Thanks to a half-witted child who babbled these slanders within Hard Wood's hearing, that man had undergone such devastating vengeance that he was carried home apparently dead; and, but for an incredibly tough constitution, he would never have regained life.

As for the women, they had hissed abroad the same hideous libel. To each of their habitations Hard Wood had come when their men were at home; and, with terrific slaps in the face and shakings that left them half senseless, he had promised to twist their heads from their shoulders if ever they spoke his mother's name again. They never did. Nor did their men attempt retaliation.

So Hard Wood's name had grown all the harder, and his house had been visited by very few except Steve and Uncle Eb. Now, with the attainment of his growth and the acquisition of notable skill in millstone-making, he had become a veritable tower of strength on which his mother might lean as her years lengthened. And the mother had been torn from him forever.

Vaguely he knew that just beyond the open door were other people: The doctor, who was preparing to return to High Falls, and women who had drifted in to commiserate and stare. They were staring now, bunched at the door; staring at him as he sat there bolt upright, and gaping at the motionless figure on the bed. One of them was beginning to sniffle in the lugubrious way considered fitting in the presence of death. He gave them no attention. Not until one of them intruded into the chamber did he move.

She was the sniffler, a long-nosed, watery-eyed female who now decided that she had waited long enough. It was time for this great lout to move and let the women take charge of things—incidentally prying into everything in the house and inspecting all the dead woman's possessions. With a sharper snuffle she came forward, bearing two huge old-time pennies which she had carefully brought with her.

"Them pore eyes won't see no more," she droned. "'Tain't fitten they should stay open——"

She stopped short. Hard Wood was rising, and somehow he seemed to fill the whole room. His black eyes bored into hers.

"Git out!" he rasped.

She sucked in her breath and gave back a step; then stubbornly held her ground.

"Now, ye pore boy, ye're all upsot, 'n' it's 'n awful sad thing, so 'tis, but ye mus'n't——"

"Git out!"

The tone was low, as before, but the impact of the words was that of fists. The watery eyes blinked, the flabby lips waggled soundlessly—and the woman got out. Behind her he strode to the door. At his advance the others apprehensively gave way. Blocking the doorway, he glowered at them.

"Out, the hull kit an' b'ilin' of ye!" he rumbled. "Ye never done nothin' to help her when she was a-livin', an' ye can keep yer hands offen her now. Git out an' stay out!"

Not a woman remonstrated. Not a woman spoke until they were all in the road. Then they began an angry cackle among themselves. He did not hear them. He was fronting the doctor, who, with overcoat buttoned and medicine case in hand, alone remained.

"How much do I owe ye?" he demanded.

"Oh, I dunno, maybe 'bout twenty dollars. Let it run along awhile if you want to, Mr. Wood. There'll be the funeral and——"

"There ain't goin' to be no funeral. Nor nobody a-pawin' her over or gawpin' at her." Hard Wood strode heavily into his own room, returned, poked the money at the physician. "G'by."

The doctor eyed him keenly.

"Good-by, and thanks. Try not to take this too hard, boy. We've all got to lose our folks sometime——"

"G'by!"

The medical man turned and went. As he drove out of the yard the women flocked toward him, demanding particulars about the burial.

"If I was you I'd git right away from here," was his dry retort.

Without another word to them he chirruped to his horse and rolled away northward.

Within the house, its master drew a bolt across the door-casing. Slowly then he returned to the still form on the bed. For a long time he stood beside her. At length, still dry-eyed, but with shoulders sagging wearily, he came out; rekindled the fire, made coffee, and drank cup after cup. Then he walked to the door and unbolted it.

As he opened it, a figure lounging on the steps turned toward him. A scowl swiftly creased his forehead, then faded. The lounger, tranquilly smoking, was Steve Oaks. On the steps beside him lay a spade.

"'Lo, Hard."

"'Lo."

Not another word was said for hours. Such is the understanding of real comrades.

THERE was sawing and hammering in the woodshed. A stout pine box was borne to the house. The pair emerged again, took spades and ax, and walked to a big maple, a few rods behind the dwelling, at whose base stood a crude but comfortable settee of boards. Two smaller maples flanked it, and the three together had formed a shady nook on hot days for the woman who now awaited her last passage to that spot. There the men dug. At length, leaving behind them a rectangular hole, a large mound, and a few severed roots, they returned to the house. There Steve sat once more upon the steps, mopped his brow, and refilled his cob pipe. His companion went in and shut the door.

For a long time it was very quiet. Through the leafless branches of maple and oak, through the shaggy limbs of the pines, soughed a chill spring wind. Down the road, mellowed by distance, sounded the occasional crow of a cock.

By and by the door creaked. Hard Wood stood there, silent. Steve arose and entered. On the floor rested the long box, its lid screwed tight. The comrades lifted it and went forth into the lengthening shadows of the dying day.

Perched on the crest of the earth heap they found half a dozen chickadees, which, on their approach, took wing into the nearest hemlock. Hard Wood's brows contracted. These cheery little feathered mites, bravely flitting over the brushy land while snow and ice still gripped the northern clime, had always been favorites of his mother. Their presence now at her graveside, like a pathetic little delegation from birdland, gave him a stab of pain. Too, it goaded the dumb ache at his heart into wrathful rebellion against her passing.

When the grave was filled, he suddenly hurled the spade from him and turned hard eyes to the cold blue sky. Straight, grim, with fists clenched and teeth set, he spoke directly to his Maker.

"God, Ye've took her away. Ye've took her jest when things was a-gittin' a little easier. Ye give her the rough end o' life an' Ye wouldn't give her none o' the smooth. Ye let my pop git shot without no reason. Ye let folks treat her mean. Now Ye've kilt her.

"She read her Bible right 'long an' she said prayers to Ye—an' Ye've kilt her. An' yit Ye let animils like them Coopers keep right on a-livin'. I don't see no sense or no jestice into it. There ain't none. An' from now on I ain't a-goin' to pay no 'tention to what Ye say is right or wrong. I'm a-goin' to use my own jedgment an' do what I want, whether Ye like it or not!"

His mouth closed like a trap. A moment longer he stood rigid, face upturned. Steve, too, stood motionless, staring at him. Dead silence enveloped the pair.

Then from the hemlock floated a soft, mournful little chant which pierced the stiff-grained soul of Hard Wood to its core.

"*Chick*adeedeedee! *Chick*adeedeedeedee!" it crooned.

A spasm of pain twisted Wood's face.

"Mom—" he choked.

Wheeling, he strode rapidly to the house.

Steve stood for some minutes, his dark eyes dwelling soberly on the mound, his ears listening to the requiem in the hemlock. Presently he drifted houseward. As he disappeared, the chickadees flitted forth and once more settled on the newly turned earth.

The outer portal was open, but the bedroom door was shut. Steve quietly went about kindling a fire and making a meal. By the time it was ready the sun had set, and the breeze had grown into a wind which moaned drearily around the chimney. Steve drew the coffee-pot toward him, lifted a bottle of colorless liquid from an inner pocket, and was uncorking it when the door reopened. The man emerging caught sight of the bottle.

"Licker?" he asked shortly.

"Uh-huh. Droppin' a little snort into the coffee. Kind o' cheers a feller up."

"Gimme it!"

After a keen look, Steve smiled slightly and passed the bottle. The other, with half a dozen huge gulps, drained it.

"Good 'nough," nodded Steve. "Ye'll feel better now. Set up an' eat. S'pose ye ain't et nothin' today, have ye? Thought so."

They sat down. As they devoured the rough fare Steve talked briefly.

"Uncle Eb would of come down, but he's got roomytiz so bad he can't walk," he said.

His companion moodily chewed on, making no reply.

"There ain't as many Cooperses as there was," the visitor added after awhile. "Mis' Cooper, she up an' made a die of it yest'day. S'pose ye hearn 'bout it."

Hard Wood stopped eating, looking blank. He shook his head.

"Yep," Steve nodded. "She's been a-failin' all winter."

His table-mate scowled. Then:

"O' course 'twould have to be her," he growled. "The onliest decent one into the hull pack."

Steve filled his pipe and puffed thoughtfully.

"M-m-m, wal, yas. 'Ceptin' mebbe the gal. She's awright, I guess. It's a-goin' to come kind o' hard for her now, too. Blind an' all, ye know."

Hard grunted again, sourly; pushed away from the table, and filled his own pipe.

"Funny thing 'bout her," pursued Steve. "Animils an' birds kind o' come to her, like. Leastways that's what I hearn. If she's a-settin' out a ways from the house, a squir'l or a rabbit 'll come right 'round her. An' the chickadees. Them chickadees 'll set right onto her lap an' eat outen her hand. I never hearn o' nothin' like it. D'ye s'pose them critters know she can't see 'em, or what?"

"Shut up 'bout chickadees!" the other broke out. "I don't never want to hear 'nother of 'em! An' shut up 'bout them Coopers too. Got any more licker?"

Steve deliberately tamped his pipe.

"Nope. An' ye don't need no more. Wal, I reckon I'll move 'long." He rose, casually probing the smoldering eyes across the table, then moved doorward. "One thing I kind o' think 'bout sometimes," he continued, "is that there's things a lot wuss than bein' jest dead. Bein' blind, now. Settin' all day an' never seein' nothin', an' a-stumblin' 'long when ye've got to go somewheres—mebbe a snake's jest ahead o' ye an' ye can't see it. Nope, I'd ruther be dead ten times than blind once. G'night, Hard."

Hard forgot to answer. A queer chill went over him as he suddenly realized that his mother's sight had been failing for some time before she fell sick. Was it possible that if she had lived——?

Steve quietly passed out. Hard Wood sat alone, surrounded by a vast emptiness. Somewhere, far, far off, seemed to echo ghostly voices of chickadees.

CHAPTER IV

DRIFTING

SPRING budded, blossomed, and bloomed into summer. The grim gray cliffs of Dickie Barre and Minnewaska jutted from a billowy sea of verdure. The stony slopes of Mohonk and Millbrook masked their harsh features under green velvet. Apple and cherry, peach and pear, starred the little Traps farms with great bouquets, and in woody recess and rocky clearing alike unfolded dainty flowerets. Robins flaunted their red breasts, bluebirds flitted like living flecks of sky, yellowhammers winnowed softly among the branches and bobbed their crimson crowns to one another. The furry little people of the ground and the branches brought forth their babies and foraged for the food to give them growth.

Men furrowed the soil with plowshares and sowed their seed; then turned again to their hoop-shaving, their quarrying, their various means of supporting themselves and their own. Again the steel of the millstone makers, no longer hampered by blizzard and ice, clinked musically and steadily along the slopes of the mountain bowl.

But there was one in whose soul the

symphony of spring awoke no echo. There was one sledge which rang no more, one chisel which struck no spark. The hammer was growing rusty in the dampness of the new season, the chisel was dull. They had cut their last stone. And that stone, unlike all others which had gone before it, would never grind grain into food for the living. Instead, it would stand guard over the dead.

It was a millstone, but cut in half. It stood at the base of a robust maple, against which, mute and empty, leaned a little settee of weatherworn boards. It bore, in neat though slightly irregular graving, the name of the woman who had been wont to sew and read her Scripture and meditate in the maple shade. Standing there like a sun half sunk below the horizon, it was strikingly original and quaintly symbolic. Yet no thought of symbols had been in the mind of the boy-man who cut and set it there. Seeking a stone for the grave, he had turned naturally to his own last millstone, not quite completed; recut it to suit the need, and put it in position. This done, he had cast aside his tools with no intention of again using them.

Hard labor and lean pay had been his lot for years. Now that his strength and skill made the work easier, his pay would have been better had he continued at his trade. But he no longer had any incentive to toil. His one fixed aim had been to excel in the highest calling of the region and thereby to provide most handsomely for his mother. With her loss, the mainspring of his life stopped.

There were others who would not have been averse to starting that spring on a renewed swing of industry. Girls of the Traps, they were, whose eyes were by no means blind to the fact that Hard Wood would be a very good catch—if he could be caught. He had been a steady worker; he now was a master at his trade; his best years were ahead of him. His intense devotion to his mother, his ferocity in protecting her, might logically be expected to become the devotion and defense of the next woman to enter his heart.

Moreover, that prowess in fight which caused him to be feared by many and hated by some only made him a heroic figure to the minds of the younger feminine element. And, despite his stony expression, he was by no means bad looking. In fact, the few who had seen him smile thought him downright handsome.

Nor were the girls alone in casting calculating eyes toward the womanless home. Matchmaking mothers are by no means confined to city society, and more than one Traps woman baldly encouraged her daughter to angle for the lonely youth. But all tentative advances fell flat, for the prospective victim himself remained totally oblivious of the fact that any fishing was in progress, and the bait would not have interested him even if he had seen it.

Thus, while the rising tide of life impelled all other fleshly things to turn their thoughts toward mates and homes, Hard Wood continued as indifferent as if he were indeed wooden. Yet, being alive and young and strong, he could not remain insensible of the primal urge to move about; indeed, a vague but mighty restlessness possessed him. So he became, for a time, a vagrant of the hills. And, in wandering, he avoided not only the roads and the haunts of other men, but even the companionship of that fellow-rover who was his best friend, Steve. His mood demanded solitude.

At first, chained by force of habit, he drifted along near-by hunting-trails laid down, perhaps, by the now vanished Indians. He had no wish to shoot any creature, but he carried always his dead father's gun; it was a silent companion which felt almost chummy to his hand. Sometimes, resting on log or stone, he contemplated that gun absently for many minutes, seeing again in memory his stalwart father and his boyhood home in the Big Indian country. Then arose in him a longing to return to the westward, to renew old acquaintances, to join one of the roystering lumber outfits and leave all this craggy Traps country behind him forever. But then the new half-moon millstone under the maples gleamed wanly before his brooding mind, and the impulse died. With a sigh, he straightened up and drifted aimlessly onward.

After a time he began to explore the maze of gigantic cliff fragments lying in fantastic confusion at the base of the precipice of Dickie Barre. Among them he found weird holes and occasional bones. The bones were always those of animals, the prey of lynx or catamount; but they were a reminder of the fact that his own skeleton might whiten there for years undiscovered if accident should befall him. So he turned from the treacherous chaos of ill-balanced blocks to the face of the cliff itself, in which he discovered caverns black as night and crevasses open to the sky. The former he left alone, having no light and no inclination to pry. The latter he clambered through, finding nothing worth while. But at length he chanced on something which strangely interested him.

Pausing at a little distance from a bastion split by a narrow black rift, he detected a small light space against one wall of the crevice, as if light shone from an opening in the other wall. That other wall was, apparently, the solid face of the cliff. Puzzled, he worked his way to the rift, sidled in, and found that there was indubitably a hole whence came the light. It was some four feet above his head. The jagged walls afforded hand-holds. Leaning his gun against the rock, he pulled himself upward. A moment later he squirmed through the hole.

He found himself lying on a rock shelf. At his right side soared a towering block; at his left fell a sheer wall, ending, some twenty feet below, in the rock-strewn floor of a natural room, perhaps forty feet square. Ahead of him, but cut off by intervening emptiness, rose the true face of the precipice. Creeping to the end of the shelf, he saw that another room ran off to the right. This one was nearly roofed by overhanging cliff; but there was light enough to show its end wall, with a faintly outlined fissure in it, and to reveal also that a tiny, silent stream of water ran from a crack in the cliff-face along a grooved bed and vanished in a cavity about midway across.

For some time he lay there studying the place. As he crept back to the hole he muttered: "I bet the Injuns used this here cave. Gorry, what a hide-out it'd be! Feller could live here months—s'posin' he had vittles—an' nobody know what had 'come o' him."

On departing, he noted every feature of the immediate environment, feeling that he should come back. And several times in succeeding days he did come back, finding a way of clambering down into the open room and thence exploring the darkened one more thoroughly. He learned only two more things about the place: That its water was pure and apparently inexhaustible, and that the shadowed split in the inner room formed a zigzag and swiftly dropping means of exit. It opened finally into thick brush about sixty feet below. Only by the most arduous effort could a man climb up it; but, if driven by extreme necessity, he could descend it.

THE wanderer's interest in the rocky covert waned, and he roved in other directions. Eastward, he climbed the Mohonk slope and rambled along the brink of the great wall fronting the Wallkill Valley; he threaded his way among jumbled crags until he stood on the stony lip of queer little Mohonk Lake, resting nearly a thousand feet higher than the valleys on either side; he scaled the precipitous slopes above it and halted at length on the dome of Sky Top.

Little did he suspect that before many years a tavern would be built on the shore of that lake, to expand later into a huge summer hotel whose supercilious "guests" would complain to the management if such as he were found on the grounds. Yet, even then, the place did not greatly appeal to him, and he lingered only to scan thoroughly the rambling valley, the creek, and the village of New Paltz to the east, and the Catskills to the north. The valley looked too smug and flat, the mountains too tame and orderly. So he came down and swung westward again into rougher country.

Threading the trails, he surmounted Dickie Barre and descended to ramping, brawling Peters Kill. And here, for the first time in many days he smiled. This was no gentle little stream, like the gurgling Coxing Kill which flowed near his own home. It differed from Coxing as the boisterous, two-fisted woodsmen of Big Indian would differ from easy-going farm folk. It was headstrong, reckless, plunging defiantly down Awosting and Peters Kill Falls, hurling itself with a growl over shorter drops, fighting ever with tilted strata and stubborn bowlders to reach its goal. Between conflicts it gathered strength, in deep pool or in quiet level, to attack the next barrier that dared oppose it. Along its course were no houses, no clearings; its rugged banks were too steep and rocky. Tough rhododendron lined its shores, and a tangle of timber rose forbiddingly on either slope above. Peters Kill was rough and wild.

Hugging his gun, he roamed a couple of miles along the little torrent, sometimes in it, more often skirting it on rimrock. The next day he returned early, having determined to follow it and learn whither it led. Four miles down, and several hundred feet lower, it began to flow more peacefully. Presently it passed under a road, and then under another. At length a highway began to run beside it, heading northeast. The traveler slowed, wavered, considered; then took to the road. Late in the day he ambled into the village of Kyserike, on the southern bank of the long Delaware and Hudson canal, which, winding here along Rondout Creek, formed the great traffic highway from the Hudson to Pennsylvania.

There, at Kyserike, he tarried for days; or, rather, in the vicinity. The town was too noisy for him; but a little outside it he could be quiet and alone. For that matter, it was not at all difficult for him to be alone even in the town. The townspeople had sized him up as "one o' them hillbillies," and they steered clear of him. The canal men, reckless though they were, also knew something of Shawangunk mountaineers; and after one glance at his gun, another at his physique, and a third at his bleak jaw and narrowed eyes, they had nothing to say to him. Still, the stranger felt crowded in the town, and spent most of his time outside it, silently watching the procession of boats.

A vast array, they seemed to him. In truth, there were many of them; for at that time a railroad along that valley was beyond imagination, and all the freight between the great river and the back districts must move by boat. Stone-boats, wood-boats, rum-boats, merchandise-boats—the stocks of backwoods stores, the clothing and the weapons and the tools of the backwoodsmen, the backwoods products of farm and forest bound cityward—all these were towed and locked along the waterway. The watchful hillman saw them all float past by countless tons, along with animals and humans of both sexes and all ages.

Once more the restless urge arose in him, goading him to get a job on one of those ugly craft and drift with it, seeing the world along this narrow but far-reaching road. But then once more the rounded stone under the maples held him back. He might go sometime, yes; but not now. The canal and its boats would be here whenever he might decide to take the step. Meanwhile it was not well to leave his little home and his mother's meager effects too long unguarded.

So, having gazed his fill, he headed back toward his Traps, going as he had come. With him he carried ancient newspapers in which his frugal lunches of bread and cheese had been wrapped up daily when he left the town. His hard years had taught him to waste nothing, and he now had two uses for those printed sheets: First, to read every word on them, and then to save them for additional bed-wrappings on future cold winter nights. He knew well the heat-preserving virtues of paper.

Starting early and striding with his natural long swing, he rapidly covered the distance to the rougher region of Peters Kill. Thereafter he perforce climbed more slowly; but so steady was his progress that by mid-afternoon he was once more resting at the start of the dim trail leading homeward across Dickie Barre. Since leaving the canal he had not paused, and now his appetite was keen. So he unwrapped his last Kyserike lunch and fell to eating. While his jaws worked his eyes crept over the little newspaper in which the provender had been folded.

This paper had been printed in Kingston, and was devoted almost entirely to local events. Chief among its items was an account of the return of a well-to-do townsman from New York city, where he had undergone treatment by a specialist. The results of the operation were considered worth half a column on the front page. The reader perused it all.

"By mighty!" he mumbled. "Think o' that, now! Some o' them doctors can fix 'most anything that ails ye. I s'pose they git an awful lot o' money for doin' them kind o' things. Still an' all, it's wuth it. Mebbe if mom could of had a city doctor——"

With a sigh he folded the sheet and slipped it under the cord binding the other papers; glanced at the sun, arose, and headed eastward.

The sun was low when he crossed the rolling top of Dickie Barre, and as he descended the eastern side he found all the Clove region in shadow. The crests of Mohonk and Eagle Cliff still shone, but the valley had lost its light for the day. With lengthened stride he swung along the winding wood-path by which he had recently become accustomed to approach and leave his place. Lonely and silent though it was, that drab little house ahead was home. After wandering afar, he now would once more sit at his own table; eat, smoke, read his papers, and then enjoy the comfort of his bed.

As he drew near, a faint, unfragrant odor floated to his nostrils. With every stride it seemed to grow slightly stronger. His brows drew together, his eyes glimmered, and his pace quickened into a lope. The smell was that of burnt wood.

Emerging into his little open field, he stopped as if shot.

His home had vanished. Where it had stood was only a sepulchral brick chimney and a black-and-gray patch of charred timbers and ashes.

CHAPTER V

DOUBT

STUNNED, the wanderer stood staring at the funereal splotch on the green. From it rose no wisp of smoke. The odor, too, seemed stale. The catastrophe had not occurred today, nor, probably, last night. The débris must be two or three days old.

Numbly he moved to the spot, casting a glance, as he did so, toward the three heavy-headed maples. Among the shadows beneath them, the low half-moon stone stood out clear and clean. No harm could come now to the still figure guarded by that monument. He turned his gaze once more to the devastated patch which had been home.

The one calamity against which he could not take precautions had befallen his place. His neighbors in the Clove, though perhaps inquisitive, were honest enough; but before leaving home he had always fastened doors and windows, wedging down the movable lower sashes with strong sticks, bolting the rear door, and locking the front one as he departed. As for fire, he had invariably made sure that the morning blaze in the stove had sunk to embers and that the drafts were shut. The house stood well away from the woods, and at this season of the year the ground was too damp and the grass too green to allow any wild fire to approach. There was no apparent reason why this disaster should have come about, unless through malicious design.

" 'Twas set!" grated the homeless man.

But "set" by whom? By man or God? His wrathful thoughts darted first to the Coopers, then to the chance of lightning. In all the time since that day on the creek when the Coopers drew their deadline, no further clash had taken place. He had stayed on his side of the line, they on theirs —at least so far as the Clove was concerned. There was no cause for them now to fire his house.

On the other hand, there had been a wicked thunderstorm three nights ago in the Catskills, some twenty miles to the north. A belated traveler, according to reports received at Kyserike, had been struck and killed by lightning. But that storm had not swung southward. Yet was it possible that the invisible Power whom he had bitterly arraigned awhile ago had now retaliated by shooting a single bolt into the Traps?

"If He done it," growled Hard, "He's awful slow an' He dunno much. The time to git me is when I'm here, not down yender into the valley."

What enraged him most was not the loss of roof and personal belongings, but the destruction of his mother's treasures. There had been a chest in which she kept them—some quaint pieces of pottery, an amethyst brooch of old design, some tintypes of his father, and similar simple heirlooms; and her clothes. There was a white dress, he remembered, in which she had been married, and which she had sometimes shown him when talking of the days before his birth. There were other dresses, too, which she had seldom worn since coming to the Traps. And there was one which she had never used at all; a new one made during the winter from a flowery cloth bought last fall from a wandering Jew peddler. This she had toiled upon while her sight steadily grew worse; and, when completed, had carefully laid away for wear this spring. Weeks after her passing he had found it in the top of the chest, and the sight of it had cut him to the quick. Now all was gone, fired like so much trash by the malignant agency which had struck while he was away.

Looking with bitter gaze into the meagre débris, he presently perceived that those charred remnants had been moved. Somebody, probably several somebodies, had been prying into them. A searing malediction which had been gathering force within him broke explosively from his set lips. He glared around, seeking the human jackals who had pawed over the bones of his house.

He found one of them. A man carrying an empty dinner-pail had come along the road and, spying him, halted. He was a millstone worker, one Jonas Brock, and nearest neighbor to the Woods. Now he came hurrying forward, a wide grin on his weatherbeaten face.

"H'are ye, Hard! Gorry, ye're awright, be ye? We been a-wonderin'——"

Then he caught the menacing flame of the black eyes. He slowed abruptly; then came warily on.

"Who done this?" flared Hard, jerking his head toward the ruin.

"Wal, now, I dunno, Hard—nor nobody else, fur's I can hear. Fust I knowed 'bout it——"

"Who's been a-pokin' into here?"

"A-pokin'? Oh, I see what ye mean. Why, some of us been a-turnin' things over——"

"You one of 'em?"

So fierce was the demand, so terrible the tone, that Brock took a backward step. But then, doggedly, he stood his ground and retorted.

"Yas, I'm one of 'em! If my house burnt an' ye didn't know if I was into it or not, ye'd poke 'round into it till ye found out, wouldn't ye? Wal, that's what we done. Nobody knowed whether ye was to home or not, an' we sort o' raked 'round into them ashes to see. Ca'm down, Hard. Don't git onreasonable."

The other's gaze bored into his, then became less sharp. Hard nodded, swallowed, and spoke more mildly.

"Awright, Jone. Been any lightnin' storm here?"

"Naw." Jonas looked curiously at him. "Ye must of been a good ways off, ain't ye, if ye dunno what the weather's been?" Getting no answer, he continued: " 'Twarn't lightnin' that done this, Hard, 'less 'twas lightnin' without no thunder or rain. Don't ast me what 'twas—I tell ye I dunno. But it come night 'fore last, way into the night. I know that, 'cause me an' Jim Quick come 'long here 'bout nine o'clock, an' yer house was jest the same as usual. Jim, he hollered out to ye, but ther' warn't no answer or no light inside, so we went 'long.

"Then, yes'day mornin', I come up the road to git to work, same's I allus do, an' the house was burnt down. Ther' was jest a little smoke a-risin', an' a few coals, but the fire was 'most out; so I figger it must of caught 'round the middle o' the night. An' ther' warn't no lightnin' that anybody knows 'bout.

"Wal, 'course the fust thing I thought was, ye'd come home into the night an' sumpthin' happened, an' ye might be into the ashes—what was left o' ye. So after I looked things over I told some other fellers, Steve Oaks, for one, an' we throwed water on to here till 'twas cool 'nough to dig 'round some. But we didn't find nothin'—no bones or nothin', I mean. So then we left it 'lone."

Hard nodded again, saying nothing.

"Wal, come 'long home with me, Hard," invited Brock. "Ye'll be jest in time for supper."

"Nope." The refusal was curt, decisive. "'Bliged to ye, Jone. 'Night."

Brock fingered his bristly chin, hesitating and probing the younger man's drawn face.

"Better come 'long," he ventured again. "Glad to have ye——"

"Nope!" The word snapped.

Brock, who possessed an inquisitive wife and a garrulous daughter, as well as a large personal bump of curiosity, turned reluctantly away.

WHEN he had vanished beyond the next brushy bend, the man beside the débris walked slowly around the site; paused a while longer, scowling down; then turned and trudged to all that remained to him—the stone and the seat under the maples. The Clove shadows now were merging gradually into twilight, and beneath the luxuriant trees it was dusk. He sank heavily on the bench, which creaked beneath his weight. And there, for some time, he stayed, unseen and unseeing.

Out on the road several men passed by, casting glances at the houseless clearing, but failing to discern the huddled figure in the darkling covert beyond. And they in turn were unobserved by the youth who sat with powerful hands gripped around his father's gun and gaze fixed on his mother's grave.

Many things passed through his mind as he sat there. The dusk thickened into gloom before his lips moved.

"Mom," he said, in husky tones, "who done it?"

From the shadow-shrouded stone came no reply. From the foliage above sounded a long sigh as a little night breeze wandered past. From the vacant grassland cheeped an insect chorus so monotonous as to pass unheard. From somewhere over on Coxing Kill floated the senseless twanging of frogs. Nothing spoke to him. Yet, presently, he seemed to have an answer.

"Yas. I figgered 'twas them," he muttered. "Them p'ison Coopers. Ain't no sense into s'posin' anybody else done it. 'Twas them! An' they're a-goin' to hear from me!"

He lengthened upward, standing grim and straight beside his long gun.

" 'Night, mom," he said.

The night breeze touched his face lightly in a soft caress. He stalked away, passing his black home-site without a pause, to the road.

A thin moon now was stealing upward over the Big Wall, and its ghostly light marked the sandy track plainly before him. At long intervals, a few houses dotted the way, each faintly illumined within by candle or oil lamp; and through open doors or windows sounded calm conversation, sharp wrangling, or shrill laughter. With only a glance at each, he swung on. After a time he reached the junction of the Clove road and the Traps road, and directly opposite him opened the darksome path leading to the Cooper place. He was on the deadline.

Without slowing, he crossed it and entered the Cooper country. As he did so, however, he reached to a pocket to reassure himself. He brought up short, feeling the pocket again, smitten by a sudden sense of loss. Somewhere he had dropped his powder-flask.

For a moment he stood nonplused. His gun was loaded, and with buckshot; but, now that he thought of it, those charges might not be wholly reliable. They had been in place for a long time, and the gun had been exposed to considerable dampness. He wanted no hangfires or misfires when presenting his compliments to the Cooper tribe. Reluctantly he turned back, recrossed the deadline, and scouted back a little way along the road, seeking the lost powder.

This quest he soon abandoned, for there was not much chance of finding the flask in the road. It probably was far away in the woods or beside Peters Kill, joggled from his pocket by rough going. After considering a bit, he once more turned about. This time he followed the Traps road, heading toward the home of Steve and Uncle Eb.

He found the pair lounging peacefully on the stoop of Uncle Eb's little yellow house, enjoying their pipes and the balm evening air. Faint though the light was, Steve's keen eyes recognized him before he entered the yard.

" 'Lo, Hard," came his usual drawling salutation. "Where ye been so long?"

"Trompin' 'round. I want to borry some powder."

There was a silence. Steve slowly breathed out a thin dribble of smoke. Uncle Eb, his frosty blue eyes peering sharply upward under bushy white brows, ejected short, rapid puffs from his walrus mustache. Neither man moved.

"Lost my flask somewheres," explained the visitor. "An' I ain't sure 'bout the gun."

"Goin' a-huntin'?" queried Steve.

"Yup. Snake-huntin'."

"Uh-huh. Copperheads, mebbe."

"Uh-huh. Things that bite when ye ain't lookin'."

Steve nodded. Uncle Eb took out his pipe, spat noisily, and cleared his throat.

"Grrrup! Had yer supper yit?"

"Don't want none. I want some powder."

"Hmp. Marthy! Put some vittles onto the table!"

Somewhere within, a feminine voice demanded: "Who for?"

"Nev' mind. Hard Wood, if ye have to know. Come in, Hard. Now don't git balky 'bout it. Come into here an' throw some vittles into ye. Any snakes ye want to git will stay right where they be. Don't spite yer stummick; it's the best friend ye've got. Come on, I tell ye!"

HE LIFTED his angular frame while he barked, shaking his pipestem at the grim-jawed youth by way of emphasis. Steve chuckled. Hard frowned, then grinned, and followed the beloved old autocrat into the house.

"Set up!" ordered Eb, designating a chair with his pipe. "Things is cold now, but that won't spile 'em. Marthy, fresh up the fire an' make some coffee. I'll have some m'self, an' some crullers. Now, son, le's hear 'bout this snake-huntin'."

Once seated before the spread laid out by Mis' Wilham, the wanderer discovered that he was ravenous. Between mouthfuls he briefly stated his case. Steve, nibbling at a doughnut, then calmly corroborated Jonas Brock. He, with others, had delved into the char and ash to ascertain the fate of the owner; then, like every one else, had waited for Hard to reappear. They had found nothing to indicate the cause of the fire.

"I've got all the proof I want," was the ominous reply. "Will ye lend me that powder?"

Uncle Eb, with another clearing of the throat, intervened.

"Grrrup! Hold yer hosses, son. Ye ain't got no proof at all yit. Ye better git some 'fore ye go gittin' brash. Now hol' on a minute an' let an ol' man talk. I've been a-livin' 'most seventy-six year, an' I've seen more'n you have. I've seen lots o' folks make bad mistakes actin' too hasty-like. I don't want ye to make no mistake.

"Ye ain't got no proof that them Cooperses done it. Ye ain't got no proof that *nobody* done it! Now, for one thing, 'less'n yer house was dif'rent from everybody else's, ye had some rats or mice into it. Didn't ye?"

"Some."

"O' course. An' ye had matches, an' ile, sech stuff. Wal, mice'll gnaw matches. There's many a house been burnt by them sneakin' little varmints. Could ye take yer oath, now, that every match into yer house was where the mice couldn't git to it?"

The younger man meditated. Grudgingly he shook his head.

"I ain't sure," he admitted. "But——"

"Nev' mind buttin'! That makes one way it could of started. An' here's 'nother way—with mice into it too. Them critters 'll make nests for theirselves under the upstairs floor, great big nests o' trash, three or four foot square sometimes; an' they make them beds right ag'inst the chimbley, so's they can keep warm. Wal, mebbe yer chimbley is kind of old, an' bimeby a spark gits through a crack into the nest, an' if ye don't find out 'bout it quick enough, yer house is gone. I see that happen m'self one time, right into my own house. Marthy smelt the smoke, an' I got water an' tore up the floor, an' 'twas the awfulest mess ye ever see—'most a bushel o' stuff. Wal, now, mebbe 'twas sumpthin' like that that started yer house. Ye had it shet up tight, an' it might of worked there a long time after ye left the place, an' finally bust out the night 'fore last."

Hard squinted thoughtfully at his coffee. Many a time he had heard mice squeaking between his bedroom ceiling and attic floor.

"An' then ag'in, s'pose somebody *did* set it. Them Cooperses ain't the onliest folks ye've fit with, ye know. There's more'n one man's got a kind of a grudge ag'in ye. Mebbe some feller got some licker into him an' went there an' done it, a-figgerin' ye'd lay it onto the Cooperses jest like ye're a-doin'. Sech things has happened here 'fore now."

He glanced at Steve, whose face contracted. Hard Wood, too, looked startled. He knew that such things had happened, and that Steve had suffered bitterly in consequence. Steve had served years in a penitentiary for burning a house and shooting its owners, when the crime really had been committed by Snake Sanders. It was this which later had led to the killing of Sanders by his scapegoat.

"Ye're right. It's happened," rasped Steve. "Hard, I ain't got no use for them Cooperses, but I want ye to be sure ye git the right man—if 'twas done by a man. Ye ain't even sure o' that. Better make sure. Ye've got good strong s'picions, but s'picions ain't proof; an' even proof is sometimes lies. I know. I'd ought to know."

Hard Wood sat a minute thinking. Then his jaw set and his eyes slid toward his gun. Steve, watching him, added: "When ye're sure, I'll give ye all the powder ye want. Mebbe I'll go 'long with ye."

At that the tight mouth relaxed a little and the eyes came back.

" 'Bliged to ye, Steve. But I aim to settle my own bills. Still an' all, mebbe ye're right. I'll wait a little while. Tomorrer I'll poke 'round into things down to the house. Mebbe I'll find somethin'."

"Now ye're talkin' sense!" approved Uncle Eb. "Ain't no use into goin' too fast. An' meanwhile jest settle down here an' make yerself to home. Ye can live 'long of us, an' welcome. We'll sleep ye with Steve. Don't talk back to me, now, or I'll take ye out an' whale ye."

Steve chuckled again. Hard grinned feebly, his eyes suddenly growing misty.

"Thank ye," he said huskily. "I—I ain't got nowheres else to go jest now."

Uncle Eb gulped his coffee, refilled his pipe, passed the tobacco. Hard fumbled in a coat pocket and drew out a battered applewood. Steve reloaded his cob. And, with no more words, the three went back to the porch, sat, and smoked in silent comradeship. In the room behind them, the Wood gun leaned even more silently in a corner—and bided its time.

CHAPTER VI

"GOD WILLIN' "

IN THE sun-splashed shade at the edge of the woods, two young men paused and scowled across open land toward a black patch where had stood a house. Over there, several children were delving into the débris.

"Git out o' that!" roared the taller of the two.

The gnome-like figures froze, staring toward the forest. The pair swung forward into the bright morning sunlight. The spell holding the youngsters broke.

"Oh, gosh, it's Hard an' Steve! An' they're mad!" squealed a boy.

At top speed he bolted for the road. The others, swept by panic, tore after him. Before the long-striding men reached the ruin the excavators had vanished homeward.

"By the time a few more folks have dug into here ye can't find nothin' at all," grumbled Hard, setting down a dinner pail and pulling off his coat. "Fust thing we know, somebody'll sneak up an' steal this dinner, 'less'n we watch it."

"Like to see 'em try it," grunted Steve. "But I don't b'lieve there was much findin's left here for anybody. Fire got everything that'd burn."

His mate gloomily surveyed the small chaos.

"Fellers that was here with ye didn't carry nothin' away, did they?" he questioned.

"Nope, ye bet they didn't. We turned over some stuff—coffee-pot an' sech-like—while we was a-diggin' 'round, an' throwed it out to one side, but I told 'em— Huh! Come to think of it, where's that coffee-pot now? It's gone. 'Less'n somebody throwed it back into here."

"Kids lugged it off, prob'ly. Some o' them little rats 'd carry off anything."

"Guess so. I told the other fellers, when we see ye warn't into here, 'Wal, then he'll be back, an' I don't want nothin' touched, or there'll be trouble.' They wouldn't bother nothin'. Wal, le's git to work."

Steadily they toiled until noon. By that time they had cleared everything except the bottom of the tiny cellar. In a small heap at one side lay such objects as had resisted the flames: The remains of the stove, the works of a once-wooden clock, cooking and eating utensils, door-knobs and hinges, and similar refuse. Dirty as coal-heavers, they knocked off at midday, washed and drank at the well, and devoured their lunch. Then Hard inspected the worthless metal thus far garnered.

"We ain't got all of it," he said. "Ye mind that chest o' mom's? 'Twas an old-timer—belonged to my gran'ther once—an' folks said it come from some furrin place; an' it had funny handles onto it, an' corner-pieces an' some strips—brass, mebbe; anyway they never rusted. An' it had a funny kind of a lock, too, an' a big key. We ain't found one o' them things. Did ye see anything like that when ye fust dug into here?"

"Nope." Steve's answer was positive. " 'Course, I wouldn't pay no 'tention to 'em then if I did; but I'd prob'ly 'member 'em when ye ast me 'bout 'em. I didn't see nothin' like that."

"Kind o' funny where they all went to. Couldn't fall into the cellar, seems like. The cellar was only under the kitchen, an' the chest set into mom's room. 'Twas jest 'bout there." He pointed to a spot cleared some time previously. Then he walked to the designated place, squatted, and searched the ashes inch by inch.

"Nothin'." He straightened up, frowning. "Wal, le's try the cellar."

They resumed their toil. At length they climbed out and looked at each other. The hole had yielded nothing but fragments of jars and bottles.

Doggedly the owner turned back to the place where he believed the chest to have reposed, and for an hour he furrowed the ash in all directions. Only old nails rewarded his persistence.

Steve mopped his forehead, adding another black smear to his face, and glanced suggestively down the road. Hard nodded grimly.

"Two o' them kids was Jone Brock's," he recalled, "an' the others was Seth Becker's. I'm goin' a-visitin'."

They followed the direction taken by the children. Presently they swung into the Brock dooryard. Within the house they heard terrified voices. The Brock children had spied their approach and fled to their mother.

“Mis' Brock!” boomed Hard.

The over-plump wife of Jonas, looking somewhat perturbed, came to the door.

“I want to know what yer boys took 'way from my place.”

“Wal, now,” hesitated the woman, “I told 'em not to 'sturb nothin', an' so'd their father, an' they wouldn't take nothin' 't was any use to ye. Says I, ‘Danny,’ says I, ‘an' Tommy,’ says I, ‘don't ye lay a finger onto nothin' o' Hard's,’ says I, ‘ 'cause he ain't——’ ”

“Wha'd they take?”

“Wal, now— Don't look so mad-like, Hard! My sakes, ye'd scare a body to death! Wal, now them younkers o' Seth Becker's, they come 'long, an' they says sumpthin' to our boys, an' fust I knowed, they was gone. I didn't know they'd gone down to your place, I thought they was jest a-playin' clus by, an'——”

“*Wha'd they take?*”

Mis' Brock fell back a step.

“They—they—they— Why, Hard, jest an ol' burnt coffee-pot an' a door-knob. That's every blessed thing! I'll give 'em right back to ye——”

“Keep 'em. G'by.”

Mis' Brock blinked and stood open-mouthed as the pair strode away. Then her fleshy countenance reddened and she turned inward with a bounce. To the ears of the departing companions came lusty slaps and shrill howls. Danny and Tommy were paying the price of causing their mother to be “scairt to death.”

AT THE home of Seth Becker they met a different reception. Mis' Becker was the watery-eyed woman who, not long ago, had been summarily banished from the death-chamber of Wood house. Now, on her own ground, the she shrewishly denied that her children had even entered the Wood yard.

“They wouldn't touch nothin' o' yourn,” she went on, with a sharp sniff, “not even if ye give it to 'em! They don't want nothin' to do with ye. Ye needn't come a-sayin' they was down to there——”

“I seen 'em!” asserted Hard. “I'm askin' ye once more, wha'd they take?”

“Nothin'! 'Tain't so! They warn't there! Nex' thing ye'll be a-sayin' we set yer house afire!”

“Mebbe ye did,” countered Hard, his voice ominous. “I'm a-lookin' for the feller that done it, an' I mind I licked the stuffin' out o' yer brother one time. Where was he the night my house burnt?”

Mis' Becker's lips wobbled. Then she burst out:

“He never! He was right to home all night an' he didn't know nothin' 'bout it. An' I tell ye, that fire warn't set! 'Twas a jedgment onto ye! 'Twas God, Hisself, that done it, 'long o' yer evil ways—a-buryin' yer mother 'thout no service an' a-tellin' Him to His face ye didn't b'lieve into Him—ye'd oughter been struck by the wrath o' God right then——”

Her voice suddenly failed, and her yellowish face turned ashy. Into the slitted eyes fronting her had leaped a look that shocked her dumb.

Hard neither spoke nor moved for half a dozen breaths. In a metallic tone he said then—

“Steve.”

“What?”

“Ye been a-talkin'?”

Steve, sole attendant at the burial of Mis' Wood, understood.

“Nary a word.”

“Then,” rasped Hard, his burning gaze holding the woman, “ye sneaked 'round to see the buryin', didn't ye? Ye couldn't paw over her like ye wanted to—ye never was fitten to breathe the same air she did, ye snivelin' ol' she ——, ye!—an' so ye crawled 'round an' spied onto us. There ain't no other way ye could know what I said. Ye varmint, ye're lower down than them Coopers! An' ye talk 'bout jedgment! Ye talk 'bout God!

“Ye're a liar an' a sneak, an' ye've proved it out o' yer own mouth. Mebbe 'twas *you* that burnt my place! If ye'd sneak to a grave ye could sneak to a house—an' set it, so's to bring the ‘jedgment o' God’ on to me! *Did ye?*”

“Oh, my Gawd, no!” moaned the woman.

“Did some o' yer tribe?”

“No! No-o-o!”

The basilisk eyes pierced to the depths of her shriveled soul.

“Then ye tell me what I asked ye—an' if ye lie ag'in ye'll find out what ‘jedgment’ is! Wha'd them brats o' yourn bring home?"

"Some—some burnt knives," she gasped. "An'—an' a stove-lifter. Ther' warn't 'nother thing."

"No lock an' key? No pieces o' brass?"

"No—nothin' but what I told ye."

"Awright. Now, ye whinin' rat, lemme tell ye somethin'. Ye ever open yer head ag'in about my mom, an' the 'wrath o' God' won't be as big as a firefly 'longside o' what'll come to ye! An' if one o' yer tribe ever sets a foot onto my land they'll git what a snake gits. Soon's yer menfolks git home tell 'em what I said."

He stalked away. The woman wavered, turned about as if in a trance, stumbled to a chair, and collapsed into it.

Back at his own yard, Hard Wood walked straight to the well, drew a bucket of water, and washed himself clean of char and ash, perhaps, also, of rage. Steve silently followed his example. Then, his tone calm and controlled, Hard commented:

"Ain't no more use into rootin' 'round here, as I can see. Them brass things are gone somewheres—I s'pose today ain't the fust time kids have poked 'round here. Likely they've lugged off a lot o' things their folks don't know 'bout. An' there ain't no sign o' how the fire started. Must of been a 'jedgment.' "

His lips curled contemptuously.

Steve, who had not spoken a word since leaving the Becker place, studied him cornerwise and then got out his pipe. Without filling it, he puffed thoughtfully at it for a couple of minutes. His gaze strayed to the stone under the maples.

"It's kind o' funny how things happen sometimes," he remarked. "I ain't got no religion; never had none; don't want none. Folks says I'm wild, an' a killer, an' sechlike. An' mebbe I am. But I ain't as wild as I was 'fore I took to livin' 'long of Uncle Eb. He's stiddied me down some. I've learnt quite a lot from that wise ol' feller. An' I've learnt that there's some things ye can't never rightly understand, an' there's some things a feller better not say.

"Now, three-four year back, there was a city feller into here awhile, name o' Hampton. He could lick his weight o' wildcats, an' him an' me got to be pretty good friends. Wal, he was a-huntin' 'round quite a long spell for a feller that was a-hidin' out from him, an' while he was a-huntin' he found Ninety-Nine's Mine. This Ninety-Nine's Mine had been lost a good many years—ever sence the Injuns died out—an' a good many fellers had hunted for it without no luck. An' now Hampton, he found it, but he didn't want it. So he told me an' Uncle Eb we could have it an' make what we could outen it; an' then he went out, back to Noo York.

"Wal, 'twas comin' on winter then, so me an' Uncle Eb, we let it lay till spring. An' we talked 'bout it a lot into the winter, an' Uncle Eb he used to say, 'We'll find it awright—God willin'." An' I'd say, 'Seein' Hampton put it all down on to paper, we'll find it anyways—God willin' or not.' Uncle Eb didn't like it, but I said it jest the same.

"Wal, come spring, we couldn't find the paper. We knowed jest where 'twas put, but when we come to look for it 'twarn't there no more. What 'come of it, we dunno.

"But I 'membered what was on to that paper, so I went an' hunted. An' I fell down an' broke my arm. When that got well I hunted some more, an' some way I kep' a-gittin' hurt. But bimeby I found the place—or what used to be the place. Everything was like Hampton said, 'ceptin' this: a piece o' rock bigger'n two houses had fell down right onto the little hole a-leadin' into the mine. It had fell down sometime into the winter while I was a-makin' fun o' 'God willin'.' An' it jest kilt the onliest chance of ever gittin' into that mine.

"What's more, that rock warn't an overhang, li'ble to fall any time. 'Twas a great big wedge o' straight-up-an'- down rock that got pried out, some way, from the side o' Dickie Barre to fall onto that one place. When I studied it all out I—wal, Hard, I got kind o' shivery. I ain't never been nigh the place sence. An' I don't make fun o' 'God willin' ' no more."

His companion stared at him. Steve's quiet confession was impressive. Soon, however, a mirthless smile quirked Hard's mouth.

"A good stiff snort o' giant powder 'd fix yer 'God-willin' ' rock, I bet."

The other tolerantly shook his head.

"Nope. It'd fetch 'bout a thousand ton more rock a-smashin' down. I thought o' that myself. The place is right 'tween two walls o' rock, an' one of 'em's jest a-waitin' for some fool to shoot a blast into there. The man ain't a-livin' that'll ever git into that mine now. It's lost for good an' all."

Hard meditated.

"Wal," he said at length. "It's kind o' funny. But I'm still a-lookin' 'round to see who put this 'jedgment' onto me. An' I still kind o' think that any rocks I run into can be fixed with some powder."

"Mebbe."

Hard picked up the empty dinner pail and led the way back into the woods-path by which they had come. After a period of silent walking he paused.

"Look a' here, Steve," he demanded, "d'ye b'lieve right into yer heart my house got burnt by lightnin' or mice?"

Steve met his eye.

"Nope," he admitted. "I dunno as I do."

"Nor me neither. Who d'ye s'picion?"

"Wal, if I was s'picionin' anybody, I guess 'twould be the same folks ye're a-thinkin' 'bout, yer own self."

"Thought so. I notice us two fellers think alike, mostly. An' seems to me I heard one time that the reason Bad Bill Cooper can't go down into the valley is 'cause he got into trouble there a few year back, 'long o' stealin' an' burnin'. Ain't that so?"

"I guess mebbe 'tis. Still an' all, that don't prove nothin'."

"Nope. It don't *prove* nothin'. But there's somethin', somewhere, that'll prove somethin', an' I'm a-goin to find it, 'God willin',' an' the —— not objectin'."

With a harsh chuckle he resumed his way. Steve, following, said no more; but his look was grave.

CHAPTER VII

THE WILDCAT

A GRAY, dull day dawned on the Traps. Hard Wood, smoking an after-breakfast pipe on the porch, studied the sky. When the pipe was smoked, he lounged out to the road and looked up and down it as if at a loss as to what to do with himself. Presently he turned westward.

"Goin' a-walkin' awhile," he vouchsafed.

Steve, shrewdly watching from the steps, answered—

"Want company?"

"Nope. Jest a-goin' over Peters Kill way. Want to kind o' study 'bout things."

He loafed away. Uncle Eb, coming from the barn, spied him and watched his going with puckered eyes.

"Where's he goin'?" he demanded, as he reached the porch.

"Jest trompin'," Steve responded, easily. "Ain't took his gun or nothin'. I ain't worried."

The old man pulled one end of his drooping mustache, peered again after the nonchalant figure, and turned indoors with a relieved air.

"Good 'nough," he acquiesced. "He ain't fool 'nough to go nigh them Cooperses 'thout his gun. An' he's a-headin' the wrong way. The time when we've got to look out for him is when he takes his gun an' starts right down the road. He's awright now."

Wherein both Uncle Eb and his foster-son were neatly hoodwinked. Hard's casual departure westward, his abandonment of his gun, his deceptive excuse, all were dust in the eyes of his friends. By a roundabout route, he was on his way to the Cooper place.

Gradually he increased his stride, and as soon as he was out of sight he began walking at full swing. Before long he reached Peters Kill; but he made no stop there. Instead, he bore off to the left and began clambering up the boulder-strewn slope of Minnewaska. A stiff climb brought him out at length on the wooded cliffs enclosing the little lake. There he paused, recovering wind and looking about him.

He was already a mile to the southward of the road forming the deadline, and thus within the region which Bad Bill had snarlingly designated as Cooper country. But no menace showed. No sign of life, except that of birds, was visible around the rocky rim. In later years, as at Mohonk, hotels were to rise upon these stark crags. But now nobody lived here. The roving gaze of the solitary man encountered only green water, gray cliffs, gloomy timber, and dull sky.

The Cooper place, he knew, must be somewhere to the eastward, near the base of the Minnewaska plateau. He knew, too, that the lake below him was the source of Coxing Kill; and he surmised that the Cooper house would be not far from the stream. So, picking his way along the edge, he sought the outlet of the still water.

At the extreme southern end he found it. Too, he found an enemy: A thick, hideous copperhead, coiled between a couple of stones. Keeping an eye on the venomous thing, he cut a stout club. This he maneuvered to goad the reptile into striking, which it speedily did. A swift swing and a crushing blow killed it.

Watching its post-morten writhings, he muttered:

"I s'pose ye're one o' the Cooper tribe. An' ye jest struck at a stick o' hard wood. An' look at what the hard wood done to ye!"

Leaving the spotted death still squirming, he went on down the tumbling little stream. As he went he kept a sharp lookout for other snakes and carried the cudgel ready for service. But no other reptile showed itself. Downward, ever downward led the ravine, the water rushing noisily over the rocks between bushy shores. For about a mile the infant creek fussed and fretted. Then, reaching a level, it became silent, flowing smoothly and swinging gradually toward the north. Thick brush still bordered it, and along it was no sound of life save an occasional bird call.

Hard paused, mopping a broken spiderweb from his cheeks and listening intently. Soon, from some point downstream, floated the crow of a rooster. The fowl was some distance away. The listener nodded, studied the ground within his limited scope of vision, and took to the left shore. The steep descent now had given way to a gentle grade, whereon grew trees large and small, and where rested boulders of all sizes. Through this cover stole the spy, stealthy now as a hunting Indian.

Yard after yard he traversed, working from tree to tree, from rock to rock, pausing frequently to listen and look. Still he saw no house, no clearing. All at once, however, he found himself in a path. Along this he trod with every sense alert. Suddenly he froze.

Before him opened a straight stretch of the path, and along it was coming a girl.

She was moving slowly, but with no hesitation. She was coming directly toward him, her head up, her gaze apparently on him. He made no move; he was almost concealed by an intervening chest-high stone, and he felt no inclination to take to thicker cover because of a mere girl. Narrowly he watched beyond her to detect the presence of any accompanying man. There was none. She was alone.

Slender, fair-haired, rose-cheeked, blue-gowned, barefoot, and about seventeen—these were the first swift impressions of the watcher. She moved with such graceful ease that she seemed to drift along the path, rather than to walk. Her eyes remained fixed on him. He held his position, but he was convinced that she saw him, and wondered that she showed no hesitation in continuing her approach. Yet she gave no indication of perceiving him.

As she came nearer, her expression showed that she was totally unconscious of his presence. Her gaze appeared to go past or over him, rather than to meet his. Her lips were parted in a little smile, and she seemed to be listening for some expected sound—a bird song, or something equally pleasant.

With a sudden sense of shock the explanation came to him. This girl was blind! She was the blind Jane—the one girl of the Cooper tribe; the girl to whom the birds came.

It couldn't be so. Blind folks had to have other folks lead 'em, or mebbe a little dog—they had to have a stick or something, anyway. Blind folks couldn't walk like that. Of course she could see. Not very good, mebbe, but—look at there, now!

She had swerved a little to one side, and, with calm certainty, sat down on a log beside the path. She touched it first with her hands, to be sure, but she showed no hesitation in seating herself. That story about her blindness was all a lie. So was the other one, about birds and animals coming to her. Just Cooper lies. Well, he'd stay here awhile and see what she did. Stealing forward, he reached the boulder, rested his arms on it, and watched.

FOR a long time she did nothing. She simply sat there on her log, some twenty yards away from him. She seemed to be listening; listening for something to move. Perfectly still, she sat; hands resting loosely on her lap, head lifted in that same expectant way. And perfectly still remained Hard Wood, leaning against his boulder, seemingly a part of the stone.

In the long, quiet interval he had plenty of time to study her profile. As he did so, wonder grew in him. Was this a Cooper? The Coopers whom he knew were coarse of nostril and cruel of mouth. Her nose was delicate and regular, her lips curving and sweet. And her hair, lying in twin golden braids down her shoulders—that did not look like the coppery Cooper mop. Only her color was that of the Coopers; they were a red-faced lot, and this girl's cheeks were flushed. Yet even in this similarity she differed from her brothers; her high color was not a thick-skinned floridness, but a clear, clean glow.

"By mighty, if she takes after her mother, like folks say, ol' Mis' Cooper must of been powerful pretty once," the watcher caught himself thinking. Then he scowled. "But she's a Cooper," he reminded himself. "There ain't a decent one into the lot. Can't be."

All at once his gaze sharpened. There was a bird, a little wild bird, on her lap! It couldn't be so—but it was. And she was actually stroking it. Not with her hand; just with one finger, touching it so gently that the light caress did not alarm it. Hard could just see that finger move. He saw, too, that the little fellow remained quiet, enjoying the soft rubbing of its downy breast.

But not for long. From somewhere another feathered visitor darted to rest on her knee. The first comer chirped indignantly; then, hopping forward, pecked at the intruder. The latter retaliated. Squawking, they joined combat, tumbling off her lap; broke away from each other while still in air, and wheeled into the thicket beyond. Hard chuckled soundlessly.

"Sassy little varmints!" he thought. "Jest as jealous as if she was a-feedin' 'em."

Neither of the birds returned to her lap, although several others flitted close to her and chirruped. The next visitor was a chipmunk, which came zigzagging yellowly toward her with the quick movements of its species, affecting extreme industry and utter unconsciousness of her presence, yet all the time drawing nearer. Soon, cocking a bold black eye at her, it voiced a piercing chirp.

The girl smiled, leaned smoothly forward, and answered with lip-sounds soft as the ghosts of kisses. Chippy squeaked in reply. Slowly she extended a hand and held it low, near the ground. After a minute of diffidence, the little forager slid forward and touched a finger with its black nose; then sat up and curled its forepaws around the finger. The pair seemed to talk to each other; the girl continuing her tiny kiss sounds, the squirrel squeaking gently in response and rocking a little on its haunches as the finger tips tickled its furry stomach. And the man stood and marveled.

Suddenly, with a shrill chirp of alarm, the little creature sprang away. In less than a second it was halfway up a pine, scolding at something below. From the woods had come a larger animal, moving with leisurely but clumsy hops, its long ears alternately flopping along its back and standing erect. It was a rabbit. Rolling an indifferent eye at the vociferous squirrel, giving its ears a humorous waggle suggestive of derision, it moved toward the girl, pausing now and then to nose at the ground. Listening intently, the maiden on the log seemed to recognize the character of the big-hipped newcomer. Again she smiled; and, for the first time, she spoke.

" 'Lo, little rabbit," she crooned, her voice gentle as the murmur of the brook. " 'Lo, little rabbit. Come, little rabbit. Come, little rabbit."

Over and over she chanted her coaxing song. And the rabbit came. With none of the busy importance of the squirrel, which now was edging down again and watching in envious assumption of indifference, the hare took half a dozen lazy lunges and squatted beside the inviting hand.

This time the whole hand, not merely a finger-tip, stroked the caller. It passed again and again along the sleek back, as if petting a cat. And, with all the confidence of a contented feline, the wild thing nestled on the grass and stayed there, only one long ear swaying erect from time to time.

At length the girl's position seemed to grow strained, for she lifted her hand and sat up, bending backward from the hips. The rabbit also sat up; turned its large eyes around; then arose and went nosing along near by in search of some green tidbit. It had moved perhaps ten feet from the girl when death struck it.

A brown streak shot through the air. A big body blotted the rabbit from sight. One terrified scream—one bestial snarl—one brief struggle—and the hare dangled quivering from murderous fanged jaws. With another lightning movement the destroyer faced the girl, who had started up.

For a few seconds none of the living creatures in that little theater moved. The man, petrified, saw a red-brown cat, spotted with darker brown on the sides, streaked with black down the back, tuft-eared, stub-tailed, flame-eyed and ferocious. He knew it for a bobcat, a creature combining the physical characteristics of both lynx and panther, and no less wicked when cornered or maddened by fresh blood. He knew more than one sturdy woodsman who had been not only put to flight, but pursued, by one of these animals on such occasions. This one was a good yard in length and heavily built; and now, with the blood of its victim in its mouth, it was savage.

An instant the brute stood glaring at the girl. Then, sensing her lack of vision, it acted with contemptuous indifference. Fixing its claws into its prey, it began rending it apart.

Smoothly, stealthily, but swiftly, Hard Wood emerged from his concealment and stole forward, gripping his club. The cat, tearing at its meat, failed to detect his approach. Then the girl moved.

Pale, alarmed, she extended both arms into the air before her. Breathlessly she appealed to the last thing she knew to have been near her.

"What—what's happened? Little rabbit! Rabbit, where be ye? What's 'come of ye?"

A horrible snarl from the cat was her answer. Infuriated, it crouched, watching her.

"Oh, my lord!" she cried piteously. "What's here? What—what——"

Her voice failed. Groping, wavering, she stepped forward.

"Stan' still, for God's sakes!" hoarsely called Hard. "Don't ye move—I'm a-comin'."

She turned quickly toward him. At the sudden movement a malevolent grimace flickered across the fierce face of the cat. An instant later it sprang.

Hard Wood, now running at top speed, desperately hurled his club. He threw it even before the destroyer left the ground—threw it with all the power of his powerful body. The flying bludgeon collided violently with the upshooting cat. Knocked aside in midair, the brute flew past the helpless girl, struck broadside against a tree trunk, and tumbled to the ground.

Dazed, it rolled to its feet and stood on spread legs, gasping and glaring dizzily around. With the marvelous toughness of its kind, it had withstood a blow that would have killed or badly injured a weaker creature; and it still was able to do battle. The man, dashing toward it, swooped up his club from the ground as he passed the girl. She seemed frozen.

MOVING more slowly and warily now, he advanced upon the cat, club raised for instantaneous work. Already the beast's dizziness was leaving it, and its malignant gaze was concentrating on the man. Its bloody lips writhed farther back from its reddened fangs. Eye to eye, tense and ready, the pair of killers fronted each other.

Both struck at the same instant: The cat with a lightning leap, the man with a lightning blow. The blow landed on the brute's left shoulder, smiting it earthward with stunning force. But, as it fell, its fore claws reached the man's legs, clawing them from thigh to ankle. With a wrathful grunt he again swung the club. This time it fell across the animal's neck. The cat flopped sidewise and lay limp.

Glowering down at the furry huddle, Hard gave it a tentative kick. There was no response. Stooping, he lifted it by the stub tail, feeling the neck with the other hand. Satisfied, he dropped it, glanced down at his raked legs, muttered something, and turned to the girl.

She still stood with arms half extended, her face turned toward the spot where the conflict had raged. Her breath was coming fast, but the terror of helplessness had faded, and her color was stealing back. Her ears had interpreted every sound, and she knew that the danger was past.

For a moment her rescuer stood looking straight into her eyes. After what had passed, there could be no question that she was sightless. Yet he was astonished to find that her eyes showed no trace of it, except a certain blankness. Knowing nothing about amaurosis, he had always supposed that blind people had whitish films over their pupils. These pupils were velvety, and the irises were a deep, clear blue.

Questioningly they remained on him, directed at about the level of his shoulders. When he spoke, though, they lifted, and her head tilted a little back.

"Awright now," he growled. "Ye better git home—an' stay there."

At the sound of his voice an odd look flitted over her face, as if those tones puzzled her, yet made her sure of something.

"What—what was it?" she asked.

"Bobcat kilt yer rabbit. Come nigh climbin' ye, too. Stay closer to home from now on."

"Oh!" She paled again, knowing now what that horrible presence had been. "Bobcat! An'—an' you kilt him. Who be you, stranger?"

He stared. So she, who could not see, knew him for a stranger. He did not realize that his voice had confirmed a suspicion which, in some intangible way, had come to her while he stood looking into her eyes.

"Nobody," he answered, speaking more gruffly than before. "Jest a stranger a-trompin' 'round. Git back home!"

She hesitated. Her hands stole out farther, uncertainly.

"I—I dunno which way's home, stranger. I'm—kind o' turned 'round, like."

Sudden pity swept him. He stepped forward and gently took one of the questing hands.

"Over here," he said. "Leastways that's where ye come from. I s'pose that's home, ain't it?"

"It's the onliest home I've got," she answered, with a little smile. "Will ye stand still jest a minute?"

Puzzled, he acquiesced. Her free hand rose and glided over his face, moving with the same feathery touch which had caressed bird and squirrel. It passed down his throat, across one shoulder, down his arm. A queer thrill passed through him, and his face felt as if tickled by a gossamer thread. He drew his free arm roughly across it to rid himself of the sensation.

"C'm'on!" he ordered, drawing her along the path, then releasing her hand. "Now keep a-goin'. Ye're headin' right."

Without another word she went quietly away. But after a few steps she slowed.

"Much 'bliged, stranger," she called back.

He made no answer. She resumed her way, proceeding now with the same sure ease with which she had come. He watched her until she passed around a bend in the path and disappeared.

"Wal, by mighty!" was all he said, looking absently along the empty path. Then he recalled himself; glanced warily about; stepped to the cat, slung it over one shoulder, picked up his club, and withdrew up the brook.

Glancing down after a few strides, he found that he was leaving a red-spotted trail; his torn legs were slowly oozing. Forthwith he swerved to the brook and waded into it. As he clambered back up the ravine he stayed in the water at all times, leaving no trace to be spied later by hostile eyes. Unthinkingly he was also giving his injuries the best possible treatment. By the time he reached the lake, the pure water had cleansed them so thoroughly that any chance of infection from the cat's claws was gone.

To this, of course, he gave no thought. He did not realize how serious such "scratches" might easily become. Nor, though he thought about it, did he realize just why the girl had passed her hand over him. He did not know that, through those delicate touches, she had learned his features and his physique almost as well as if she had seen him. Still less did he suspect that, instead of informing her "tribe" of the presence of a mysterious stranger, she was keeping the morning's events to herself.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAVE MAN

THE wanderer's return with a dead wildcat and a pair of lacerated legs created some commotion in the Wilham household. Uncle Eb was astounded, and even the woods-roving Steve was surprized. Killing a wildcat with a stick, although not unprecedented, was decidedly unusual.

"I never heard o' nothin' like it, 'ceptin' once," declared the old man. "That was 'bout twenty year ago, when Jake Van Hooven done the same thing. Jake had a dawg, though, an' the dawg put the critter up a tree fust. The tree was off by itself, like, an' there warn't no place for the varmint to go after he got into it. Jake, he cut a good stout stick an' clumb up an' kilt it. Leastways, he knocked it outen the tree. I've allus kind o' thought the dawg done the real killin' after the cat tumbled down, but o' course I dunno. But to go right up to one o' them things onto the ground an' kill it, without no dawg or nothin'—I never did hear o' the like!"

"What s'prizes me," commented Steve, "is a bobcat a-jumpin' right front o' ye like that—'specially this time o' year. They're awful shy critters; ye don't hardly never see 'em, though everybody knows they're 'round. If 'twas into the winter, now, an' they couldn't git much to eat, 'twould be dif'rent. Ye must of been a-settin' awful still, an' he couldn't of winded ye. Right 'longside the crick, did ye say?"

"Uh-huh." Hard had neglected to mention that the creek was Coxing, not Peters Kill. "Standin' still an' watchin' some birds an' things. All at once this varmint was there. So I hit him."

"An' lost most o' yer pants for doin' it," chuckled Uncle Eb. "By gorry, son, seems like everything's pickin' on to ye lately, don't it? Next thing we know, a hawk or sumpthin'll be flyin' off with yer shirt, an' then we'll have to chain ye into the barn till we can git ye some clo'es."

"Long's I don't lose my health an' my gun I can stand the rest of it," smiled Hard.

Further conversation was cut short by a peremptory summons from Mis' Wilham, who ordered him to rub salve on his wounds. By the time this more-or-less infallible healer had been applied and a whole pair of nether garments—donated by Uncle Eb—had been donned, dinner was ready.

During the meal Hard was even more taciturn than usual; for his mind was where his body had so recently been, and he was seeing again the queerly trustful birds and animals and the odd girl who petted them. It was with some difficulty that he refrained from speaking of the matter to Steve, who, he knew, would be intensely interested in the behavior of those little wild things. But he was quite aware that Steve would be even more interested in the disclosure that he had been reconnoitering Cooper land, and this he purposed to keep to himself.

Besides, and the thought halted his jaws a moment, was it not quite likely that Steve himself had at some time observed the girl and her way with animals? More than likely. Steve went where he willed and knew many things which he did not reveal. Hard nodded to himself. He would continue to keep his own mouth shut.

So engrossed in his thoughts was he that he forgot all about his ripped legs, and, at the end of the meal, arose with his customary alacrity to get his pipe. A badly gouged knee gave him a twinge that made him wince and halt. Mis' Wilham, watching, reproved him.

"Land's sakes, Hard," she expostulated, "can't ye show no mercy to yerself, even? Did ye think them legs 'd git well while ye et? It's 'bout time ye got a little sense, seems like. Git up an' down a little easier."

Hard's eyes narrowed a trifle. He knew the admonition was prompted entirely by concern for his own welfare, but he did not quite relish the way in which it was delivered. Mis' Wilham, although as goodhearted as Uncle Eb, was a bit sharp at times in her tone, and in the motherless youth such a tone instinctively aroused antagonism. His mother had always spoken quietly. Uncle Eb, too, had a different way of expressing himself; he might have used those identical words, and barked them out as if about to bite off the listener's ear, and yet they would have evoked only a grin from the man addressed; the old man's personality would have robbed his apparent reprimand of all sting. Mis' Wilham did not possess that personality.

Hard made no reply, but got his pipe and filled it, frowning down at the sore knee. He foresaw several days of inaction while the injuries healed, and inaction was not welcome to him. Neither, in his present mood, was the prospect of further "fussin'" by the mistress of the house. In that moment was born in him a distaste for remaining longer under the Wilham roof.

Nor did that feeling pass off. Rather, it grew stronger within the next few days. He became not only restive because of his temporary disability, but increasingly conscious of the fact that his housemates were keenly interested in what he considered his private affairs. Nothing was said about the Coopers, or about the burning of his home; but he was aware that a casual oiling of his gun caused an exchange of significant glances, and that conversational pauses occurred at moments when it would be appropriate for him to speak of any plans he might have.

Rightly or wrongly, he began to feel that he was under surveillance, and his independent spirit rebelled. Too, it went against the grain of the Wood pride to be obligated to any one for food and shelter and, though he still had some money, he knew it would be a mortal insult to offer to pay Uncle Eb for his hospitality. So, for all these small reasons, the house became more and more repugnant to him. The obvious solution was to leave it.

Giving no sign of his thoughts, he next considered the problem of where to live. The answer came quickly, and with it a grin. He certainly could be independent in that place! Free alike from friends and enemies, able to come and go unobserved, proof against fire or buckshot. The only question remaining was that of food and similar necessities. And, since he had the money to pay for them, this was hardly a puzzle. Surreptitiously pinching the thin packet of bills hidden in his waistband—his hiding-place for his small savings ever since he had taken to rambling—he laughed silently. Until that was gone, he need not be beholden to anybody; and when it was gone, he could earn more.

His new place would even be well suited to an easier and more lucrative, though more hazardous, industry than millstone work. He had no real intention of taking up that occupation, but he recognized the possibility and played with the idea. After he had found and settled with the destroyer of his home—that, of course, must be attended to first—then he could try that line of work, if he felt so inclined. At any rate, he would be absolutely free to do so.

With this new liberty beckoning to him, he became more cheery and more conversational. And, with the possible new trade in mind, he guardedly sought information concerning it one night after the household had retired.

"Where d'ye git yer licker, Steve?" he asked his bedfellow. "Don't make it yerself, do ye?"

"Nope. Too much work into makin' yer own. I'd ruther buy it. Why? D'ye want some?"

"Wal, no. Not now. I was jest a-wonderin' what a feller had to pay."

"Uh-huh. I can git all I want for fifty cents a quart. Kind o' dear, but it's good stuff. I leave it 'lone most o' the time, anyway. I've got to. My temper ain't none too good, an' a bellyful o' licker don't make it no better. It's powerful good medicine when a feller needs it, but he'd better leave it 'lone when he don't."

"Mebbe so," acquiesced the younger man. "Still an' all, there's lots o' folks that want their medicine kind o' regular, like. Ought to be good money into makin' it."

Steve turned on a side, and the other felt his eyes peering through the dimness. It was a minute or so before the reply came.

"There's money 'nough if a feller goes 'bout it right an' don't git caught. But he's got to take it outside to sell it—he couldn't make much money onto it here—an' then he's got to look out for the revenoo men. An' when they git him he goes into the pen. An' if ye knowed what that was like, Hard— Wal, *I* don't want no more of it! An' if any friend o' mine was a-thinkin' o' 'stillin', I'd tell him to forgit it quick."

"I don't see no crime into it," maintained the seeker after knowledge. "Ye can take out yer corn an' sell it, an' nobody cares. If ye 'still the corn an' put it into jugs, an' folks want to buy it, whose business is it? It's jest as honest one way as t'other."

It was the old, old argument of hillmen; and Steve answered like a hillman.

" 'Course. Everybody knows that—'ceptin' the gov'ment an' the revenoo men. But they've made a law ag'in it, an' what can ye do? They can make it a crime to spit or blow yer nose if they want to, an' if ye go down 'mongst 'em they've got ye. Best thing for us mountain men to do is stay into our mountains, an' not sell licker or nothin' else to them people outside."

Hard was silent. After awhile he yawned, turned over, and went to sleep. His hazy idea did not look so attractive as it had.

TO THE more immediate and important plan of changing his habitation, however, he clung unswervingly. And when, toward the end of the week, Uncle Eb hitched up his old white horse and mounted his weather-beaten wagon for his regular drive to High Falls, his guest astonished him by handing him a list and quietly requesting—

"Git me them."

Much perplexed, the old fellow glanced down the column of wants—ax, blanket, powder, shot, lantern, oil, matches, cooking utensils, and various food ingredients—gave his mustache a twitch, and squinted frostily at Hard.

"What ye want them for?" he demanded. "Ain't a-leavin' us, be ye?"

"Guess so," nodded Hard. "I'm 'bliged to ye for takin' me in, Uncle Eb, but I'm a-gittin' kind o' restless, an' I've got a place into mind——"

"Grrrup! What's to hender ye stayin' here nights an' goin' where ye like daytimes, same's ye've been doin'? We ain't puttin' no chains onto ye, be we?" The old man was waxing indignant.

"I'm a-movin' somewheres else," was the calm but inflexible response. "Did ye ever stop to think this house 'll burn as easy as mine did? An' that the feller that burnt me out once might do it twice? Seein' I ain't got him yet, I'm a-livin' into 'nother place till I do git him. Le's not fight 'bout it."

A startled look shot across the wrinkled face, and the blue eyes swerved to the house. Indeed, Uncle Eb had not thought of that; and the sudden vision of his home destroyed by a firebug staggered him.

"By mighty!" he snapped. "If anybody ever done that— But, pshaw, nobody would!"

"Ye can't tell. An' I'm a-movin'. Git me them things."

One more searching look convinced his host that argument was useless. He slapped the horse with the reins and rolled away. On his return he brought the required articles and accepted payment without protest.

During his absence, Hard journeyed to the spot he had in mind, his legs now being so far improved that he walked without much difficulty. After studying it anew for a time, he returned, well pleased. And that night, despite pointblank questioning, he declined to reveal the whereabouts of his projected new home.

"Jest a little place over yender," was all the indication he would give, moving his head toward the butte of Dickie Barre. "I've had it into mind quite a while."

When, the next morning, he slung a bulky pack on his back and trudged forth with gun in one hand and ax in the other, Steve made no effort to trail him. Walking with only a slight stiffness, the departing guest swung down the road to the old "cross-cut," turned toward the north, and disappeared in the brush.

For more than a mile he plodded along the gently rolling path; then, swinging to the left, began to climb. Presently he entered the labyrinth of boulders, among which towered trees standing at queer angles, but giving welcome shade from the hot eastern sun. Threading his way with sure steps, he soon reached a bold jut of the cliff, split by a fissure. At the dark rift he stopped, unslung his pack, and passed a hand across his streaming brow. He was at the doorway of his new habitation, the "hide-out" which he had discovered in his aimless ramblings weeks ago, and which had so much interested him then and later.

It took him some time to lift all his equipment in through the high entrance hole, lower it to the inner room, and stow it along the cliff wall in accordance with his desires; to make a stone fireplace, and to bring in fuel and bed material. But by sundown all was ready, and a kettle of beans and bacon was bubbling merrily on his improvised stove. Sitting on a flat block, he smoked and looked around him with vast content.

Snug against the cliff lay his bed—a deep, springy couch of hemlock limbs and tips, on which was his blanket. Beside it, his long gun leaned against the rock. At his feet burned the fire, cooking his frugal meal and throwing fantastic gleams around the darkened chamber; and a yard or two away ran the quiet, friendly little spring which would never bother him with talk. Overhead hung the wide natural roof, and around stood impregnable walls. Outside the only sounds were a whisper of breezes in tree-tops and the faint, far-off insect chorus, so vague as to pass unnoticed.

"This is home," he murmured, his gaze resting on the tons of rock overhanging him. For a time he lay quiet, instinctively listening for some sound. None came, save the distant chant of a whippoorwill.

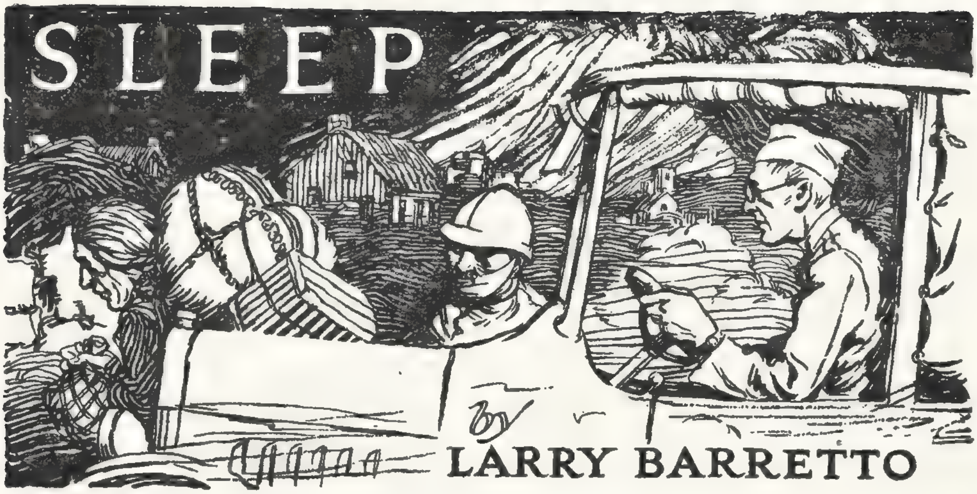
His thoughts drifted to Steve's tale of the rock which had fallen on Ninety-Nine's Mine, and he peered again at the roof, faintly illumined by the dying glow of the fire. Massive and menacing it hung there, seemingly ready to crash down at a breath. Yet he grinned.

"Jedgment!" he scoffed. "If 'twas a jedgment that throwed down that rock o' Steve's, an' jedgment that burnt my house, now's a good time for 'nother jedgment. Why don't ye fall down, up there, an' mash me to nothin'? Mebbe if ye don't I'll git to 'stillin' some day an' bust the law. Come on, jedgment—I'm a-waitin'."

The rock remained unmoved, as it had for untold centuries. He laughed scornfully, yawned, and let his lids droop.

The fire died. Velvety dark enwrapped the cavern. The little night winds flowed over the stony barrier, eddied around the sleeper, and veered away again. Through the gap above, between roof-edge and farther wall, shone the bright eyes of the heavens: The stars, drifting ever westward, and, one by one, peering down into the rift to smile at Hard Wood—cave man.

TO BE CONTINUED



SLEEP

by LARRY BARRETTO

Author of "Mute and Inglorious."

WHEN Peter Fallon stepped off the train at Meaux on that hot May morning he was a dejected and battered figure. His uniform was the worse for wear and weather, but its deficiencies were covered by a raincoat, several sizes too large, which flopped about his ankles. His hob-nailed shoes were badly worn and cracked and the spirals wound about his thin legs were loose and mud-caked.

It was his face, however, which showed the depths of his degradation. No razor had touched that freckled surface for days, and a large bruise adorned and discolored the right eye. Above it rust-colored hair thrust out from beneath the monkey-like overseas cap which perched on one side of his head with an effect of jauntiness. No officer would have passed him on parade; an inspection would have involved grave penalties. Even his own mother might have turned from him with some aversion could she have seen him now.

The French transportation officer in a neat blue uniform and gay yellow boots who sat behind the desk in one corner of the station eyed him with disfavor as he approached.

"*Que voulez-vous?*" he demanded, and peered at Peter's collar insignia, making sure that this was indeed one of the mad Americans with whom he had to deal.

"I want," said Peter in the inaccurate French which six months of bitter necessity had taught him, "to find the American Ambulance Section 5, attached to the 34th Division, French."

He had no particular expectation of finding them here or anywhere, but four days of asking made the words automatic.

The lieutenant pursed his lips over this and studied a complicated chart.

"*Ah! Division Savatier!*" he exclaimed at last. "It is at St. Dizier. You should go there. I will make out travel orders. The next troop train——"

"You will not!" Peter interrupted with force. "I've just come from St. Dizeer and they ain't there."

The Frenchman knit his brows.

"But the 34th, the division of General Savatier, is at St. Dizier. Look, it says so here." He pointed triumphantly at some figures on his chart. "I will make out travel——"

"Oh, help me make this boob understand his own language," Peter prayed. "No. No. No!" He thrust his face closer and raised his voice to a higher pitch. "Not the French division—*pas division française.* American Ambulance Section attached to it—*effecté avec*— Oh, ——, what's the word. Listen, Jack, I've been sick in a French hospital at Beauvais with gas. Me, *le gaz.* Three weeks." He tapped his chest. "*Savez?* Now I'm well and I want to find my outfit. For four days I've been riding on troop trains and I'm tired and hungry. You birds have sent me to

Creil, St. Dizeer, Vitry and Toul, and now here. Where is my gang? I can't stand much more."

His voice broke in a wail. This business of being lost was not so pleasant as he had imagined it might be.

"You wish to find the American Ambulance Section formerly attached to the 34th?" asked the lieutenant intelligently.

"That's right," Peter told him. "Here are my papers."

He drew from his pocket a worn travel order, much stamped, and laid it on the desk. The lieutenant studied it.

"But they are here," he said. "At Trilport. Why didn't you show me this before?"

"Thank God!" Peter exclaimed, and felt his eyes fill with illogical tears.

He was still weak. To cover this sign of effeminacy he spoke sternly in English:

"That's what I've been telling you dumb birds for four days, but you didn't get me. Where is Trilport?" he finished in French.

"Three kilometers beyond Meaux on the Paris highway," said the officer coldly. He may have sensed the insult.

"How do I get there?"

"You walk."

"Oh, well," sighed Peter. "I guess I can stand a little bit more."

He saluted casually and left the station, limping slightly, the over-long raincoat trailing about his ankles. The French officer stared after him scornfully.

"One of our allies!" he commented, and busied himself rolling a cigaret of black and stinking tobacco.

The road to Trilport was a gray ribbon powdered thick with dust which rose in clouds about Peter's plodding feet. On either side green meadows stretched behind stone walls and hedgerows, and trees swayed gently in the light breeze. In the distance the river Marne sparkled in the morning sun. A nodding figure in a blue smock was clutching a fishing pole on the bank. Overhead tiny white clouds like puffs of smoke from an anti-aircraft gun drifted past and shadowed for a moment the green fields and the gray farmhouses beneath. It was a peaceful countryside, smiling and far removed from war.

After half an hour Peter began to lag; his shoes seemed to have changed from leather to lead, and little streams of perspiration made furrows in the dirt on his face. There was a nervous vacuum in the pit of his stomach and black sparks were dancing before his eyes. He should have been in his bed in the hospital at Beauvais, but the constantly increasing stream of sick and wounded from the Somme front had made it imperative that all who could possibly leave do so, and therefore he had been discharged as cured.

IT GREW hotter, and Peter found a seat by the roadside. He glanced disconsolately at his watch, broken beyond repair, which was still strapped to his wrist. That had been the result of an argument the previous day with an English Tommy, full of fight and liquor, who had maligned the American participation. It also accounted for his black eye. Peter Fallon had been badly worsted. He decided that in future he would restrain his patriotism until he had recovered his strength.

"What the —— is the good of standing up for Pershing," he thought. "He never did nothing for me."

There was no means of knowing what time it was, but the sun stood almost overhead. There seemed to be no end to this road which led on and on without a sign of the village which should be Trilport. For a time Peter considered returning to the railroad station at Meaux and telling the French officer there what he thought of him in assorted language, but he lacked the energy. Doubtless he would be sent off on another wild goose chase if he did. He considered with some bitterness his missing outfit. They had no right, no none at all, to leave the place where they were stationed when he had been evacuated to a hospital, giving him this jaunt over northern France to find them. Probably they were in some cozy corner now, with wine and girls and no work to do, while he was shunted from town to town in this hopeless quest.

"If some other outfit was to come along now I'd join up just to get my belly full, even if they was M.P.s or Senegalese," he muttered and looked hopefully along the road.

No other outfit was in sight, but a farmer driving a horse appeared over the slight crest. When he came abreast of him Peter saw that his face was covered with a thick, gray beard and that he was comfortably seated on a load of manure. Peter stood up and hailed him.

"How far is it to Trilport?"

"Three kilometers," the farmer gave his opinion after some consideration.

"But I've walked three kilometers already!" Peter cried indignantly.

"Three kilometers," the farmer repeated with assurance.

"Oh, well, I guess I can stand a little bit more," Peter said and got to his feet.

"You have a rubber coat," the farmer observed, with a faint glitter in his eye.

Peter drew the garment closer to him.

"Well, it's mine. I didn't steal it," he said.

"I will buy it for twenty-five francs."

The American made a rapid calculation. Twenty-five francs would keep him supplied with food for several days and he would not have to patronize the unspeakable soldiers' canteens which had been feeding him lately. It was strictly forbidden to sell government property under pain of almost death, but Peter gave this no thought. He might not find his section for another week and in the meanwhile he had to eat. They ought to be glad enough to see him anyway, with or without his outer garment.

"The price is forty francs," he said carelessly.

"Twenty-five," the farmer answered, and clucked to his horse.

"Hey! Wait!" Peter called, seeing this enormous profit slipping from him. The coat had not cost him anything.

They compromised finally on thirty francs and the man, drawing out a small leather bag, counted that sum over reluctantly, franc by franc. Then with the precious raincoat folded across his knees to keep it from the manure he drove off in triumph leaving Peter to face the empty road again.

But it was easier now. As he walked he jingled his wealth and pictured to himself exactly how it would be spent. The thought of the eggs, cheese, steak and beer that it would purchase almost made his stomach feel full again.

Before him the thin tower of a church pierced the sky and below it the gray of roofs. This would be Trilport, and Peter quickened his steps. If only luck were with him he would find his outfit here. It was. On the outskirts of the village a man in the familiar khaki uniform lounged in the sun on a bench before the door of a café. With a rush of emotion that choked his throat Peter recognized Jerry Barr, the mechanic. Never again would he let his own crowd get away from him. But when they met their manner was severely casual, hiding whatever lay beneath.

"Hey, why don't you guys move to Spain or some place where it's easy to find you?"

"Hello, Fallon, we thought you were dead. Where did you show up from?"

"I've been all over —— and back to get here. Everything all right?"

"Sure. Say, Pete, you look bad. Have you got over that gas all right? They say sometimes it does queer things to a man after he seems to have recovered. We don't want you to go croaking on us now you've come back."

Barr looked at the tired gray face with affectionate anxiety.

"Oh, go pin a crepe band on your arm for some one else," Peter answered uneasily. "I'm fine. Where does the loot hang out? I gotta report."

"I'll show you," Barr volunteered. "Oh, baby, we're sittin' on the top of the world here. Girls and liquor and payday next week and the people ain't hostile. We're detached from the 34th and here we stay until we're needed again. I hope they forget us until the end of the war. You'll like Trilport, Pete. It's a good dump."

"I'm going to," Peter answered firmly. "Just as soon as I get a square meal inside me and about thirty hours' sleep. I'm all in."

Other men were coming out of houses to meet him. Those who had languidly been washing some ambulances dropped their sponges and hurried up. In the distance the clatter of a tin pan being beaten sounded—the cooks' call to mess. A stout good-looking woman smiled at the Americans from the door of her café. Peter Fallon felt that he had come home at last.

II

IT SEEMED that night as if he had only been asleep for a few minutes in the barn where the men were quartered when a raucous voice, breaking in on his dreams, shouted orders from the doorway. They sounded an unintelligible murmur far away to Peter who turned on his stretcher again to shut it out. Every muscle in his body was sagging with fatigue, every nerve clamoring insistently for the rest he needed. But the voice continued. It could not be morning yet.

Reluctantly Peter opened his eyes and looked at his watch. The illuminated dial flashed particles of green fire, but one hand was gone and the other bent at an unnatural angle. Then he remembered his fight with the English Tommy two days ago. The black eye was nothing, but his watch was beyond repair.

Around him men were stirring, muttering objections, crawling to their knees. A match flared and a lantern was lighted. They crowded about the sergeant, silent now, listening to what he had to say.

"We've got to get going at once. The Germans have broken the lines somewhere above Fismes and we're going in again."

A chorus of low moans greeted this news.

"Wouldn't you know it," Barr complained. "The only decent spot we've struck in France, but would they let us stay here? Yes, they would not!"

"What the —— are you beefing about?" the sergeant demanded. "Three weeks' rest in a darn fine town without a car to repair, and now you're kicking because we have to leave. What do you think the army sent you over for, a pleasure trip?"

Peter Fallon felt his knees grow weak; he was filled with a sense of deprivation, of bitter loss. He had had no three weeks of rest. That period for him had been spent in a hospital where the food was beyond relief, and men in the darkness around him raved, or died quietly with bubbling sounds on their lips. Then four days of useless travel, while he battled with the incredible stupidity of the French or slept uneasily in jolting freight cars. The sergeant noticed his drawn face, the drooping shoulders.

"It's too bad, Fallon," he said kindly. "I don't believe you're in shape to go on and they should never have let you out of that hospital, but I don't know exactly what to do about it. We can't very well leave you here."

"You bet you can't," Peter interrupted.

Such an idea filled him with horror. He was sure of one thing at least—that never again would he be separated from the outfit. For him safety lay only with his own kind. Now he straightened his shoulders and spoke with an effect of cheerfulness:

"Never mind. If the others can stand it I guess I can."

"Get going then," the sergeant ordered. "Be sure to pack everything. There won't be time for breakfast, but the cooks will give you bread and cold coffee."

A half hour later a line of twenty ambulances passed through the village and out across the sleeping countryside that lay quiet under the starlight, following the winding roads back again to the front and the shock of contending armies.

At the head of the column the lieutenant's touring car flashed along under its driver's hand while the officer studied a large scale map.

Peter, at the wheel of his own car, had become an automaton, forgetful of everything, staring straight ahead at the dim road. Occasionally the fortune jingling in his pocket reminded him of pleasures he had missed.

The hours sped by on sable wings that turned to gray. A rosy glow in the distance became a smudge of smoke. Some village was burning. The lieutenant's car turned to the edge of the road and halted. Behind it the ambulances drew up in exact alignment and the drivers hurried forward for instructions. The officer, a thin, nervous man, twisted the map in his fingers.

"We were going to Fismes," he said, "but that is impossible now. The Germans have broken the lines there and probably the town has fallen. Fismettes, also. Lieutenant Noyer says now that we will go to Mont Notre Dame. There is a hospital there and we will try to get new orders. At the moment all communications are broken."

In the back of the touring car the French liaison officer, fat and bland, nodded agreement. He had been in the war for too many years to be disconcerted by any unexpected development. The men looked at one another uneasily. This news that they had no definite objective alarmed them.

Peter felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. He had, he thought, been lost enough this week to last him a lifetime. It was disturbing to think that ahead there was a wall of Germans sweeping on, tumbling forward and spreading out like a great green wave without a protecting shield of infantry.

"We will continue now," the lieutenant continued with a confidence he was far from feeling. "Mont Notre Dame is ten kilometers away and while we do not think the

Boches are anywhere near it we will proceed with care. Save your gas as much as possible; I do not know where we will get any more. Get back to your cars."

The line moved forward more slowly now over the barren plateau which was broken only by an occasional farmhouse, gray and bleak, deserted by its owners. No cattle grazed among the stubble of the fields and no humans were to be seen. It was a desolate plain, deserted by man. The light grew brighter and in a clump of bushes a bird began to sing, a defiant piping against the loneliness of creation.

Four kilometers more, and the line stopped again. There were women in the road, six or eight white capped nurses from the British Red Cross, trudging along supporting wounded soldiers in the English uniform who limped beside them. Two of the women carried a stretcher on which a wounded man groaned, stifling his curses. Their slight shoulders bent under the weight of it. Without permission the men left their cars, crowding about them.

"Mont Notre Dame?" said a nurse who seemed to be in authority, her crisp English voice sounding clear on the still air. "Rather. We've just come from there. The Germans took the place half an hour ago."

"But it's at least twenty kilometers from the lines," some one protested indignantly as if he had been deceived.

"It's two kilometers inside the lines by now, I expect," the nurse told them. "We only just got out. There was fighting at the other end of the town when we left, but it seems to have quieted. I suppose the men are all captured. All the wounded who were able went up to do what they could with the doctors, orderlies and ambulance drivers."

She spoke casually as if offering afternoon tea, but the drivers stiffened as if an electric current had been applied to their spines. Each man wished to turn his car around, away from the menace in the distance, but no one cared to be the first.

"What are you going to do?" the lieutenant asked.

"Walk until we are captured," the nurse answered cheerfully. "It can't be very long now."

The French lieutenant spoke from the back of his touring car, smiling vaguely like a Buddha.

"We will now go to Cohan where there is another hospital," he stated in his precise English. "The nurse ladies will ride in the back of the ambulances with their wounded."

"Where is this here Cohan?" Peter asked Gridley, one of the drivers, as they turned their cars about.

"How the —— do I know? It's probably in Germany."

"Well," said Peter with conviction, "if there's a hospital there and an extra bed I'm going to turn in and sleep for a week. I'm half dead."

COHAN proved to be a depressed village on a hillside whose straggling streets ran in all directions. On the top of the low hill stood a bleak château converted into a hospital, and before it the ambulances were parked.

The ruck of retreat had already struck the town which was filled with French and English soldiers wandering around in a dazed manner without orders, their organizations lost. The civilian population had already departed, closing their shops.

Peter, with money in his clothes, found nothing to spend it on. The afternoon was spent in listening to wild rumors which grew more incredible as the hours wore on, but they were believed implicitly.

The Germans had captured thirty thousand French in the first rush; they had taken a thousand guns; Cohan was in a salient about to be snuffed out. Already the enemy were far beyond it on either flank; Montmirail even had fallen. Foch had been superseded, he had been court-martialed, he had been shot. The men, fretting under inaction, nervous at the unknown, accepted everything at its face value.

"There's not a word of truth in it," declared the lieutenant in an attempt to restore morale. "You yell before you're hurt. Cohan is miles from the front and the retreat has been stopped. Here we are and here we stay until we get orders from somebody."

He was in an extremely nervous state, having spent the afternoon attempting to get some headquarters on the telephone which should tell him what to do, and infuriated with the French lieutenant who sat smoking blandly, murmuring his inevitable phrase—

"It is the war."

Toward sunset a German airplane, flying low from the east, sailed over Cohan and machine-gunned the main street with impunity. The evening light shone on its black cross and the drone of its engines increased to a roar. Frantic men dived for cellars or crawled under the inadequate shelter of cars. The *spat-spat* of bullets sounded and a thin scream pierced the air as some one was wounded.

Within twenty seconds the street was deserted and the airplane drifted off, slowly, contemptuously, leaving the men to gather up the bodies of four dead Frenchmen who sprawled grotesquely, their blue uniforms smeared with dust and blood.

Ten minutes later a group of wild-eyed soldiers entered the town, their guns gone, their helmets thrown away. The Germans, they said, were only a few miles distant; they were advancing rapidly; the thin line that was holding them back had been engulfed. They alone were survivors.

Instantly panic struck Cohan. From the hospital a stream of wounded men poured forth, dressing as they came, limping on sticks and clinging to one another. A white-faced doctor and two frightened nurses volunteered to stay with those who could not be moved. In the town itself leaderless men began to hurry away by twos and threes. At the end of the street some fifty men, working frantically with picks and shovels, were throwing up a barricade. The rumor spread that the Germans would enter the town from another direction and they started work all over again, only to abandon it finally.

A French officer of high rank shouted orders which nobody obeyed, and then he too disobeyed, slipping away in the twilight in a gray staff car. Some one said he had gone to investigate the advance, but he did not return.

"Now," said Lieutenant Noyer to the Americans gathered about him, "we will go."

His smooth fat face was wrinkled with concern.

The American officer added a few words:

"Try to keep together, but if you get lost in the darkness make for Château Thierry. It is a big town and you will find it on your maps. Carry anybody you can, but don't overload the cars. If we get out of this hole we may need them."

"What roads shall we take, Lieutenant?" somebody asked. "We don't want to run into the Germans."

"You know as much about it as I do," he answered irritably. "If you see anybody that looks like a German burn your car and beat it. They won't hurt you; you're ambulance men."

"Like —— they won't!" Gridley muttered. "Didn't they chuck a grenade into a cellar full of us at Beaupré? Say, Lieutenant Nelson, what about Fallon here? He's sick and all in. Can't some one drive his car? He can sleep in the back of mine."

Lieutenant Nelson looked at Peter's red-rimmed, sleepless eyes and dismissed that problem.

"It would mean that his car would have to be abandoned and we can't do that. If only there were not so many men on leave——"

Peter straightened up against the car he had been leaning on. Hot needles were piercing his lungs, his vision was blurred and neither his arms nor his legs seemed to belong to him.

"Oh, don't bother about me," he muttered. "I can stand a little more."

III

NOW the roads were no longer empty. As the darkness increased the traffic grew heavier and it became more and more difficult for Peter to follow the ambulance ahead of him. It seemed as if he were speeding along at a tremendous rate, only to stop suddenly without warning, and he narrowly avoided several collisions.

The moon rose and lighted a desolate scene etched in black and gray. Hurrying shapes sped along in the ditches; voices spoke in French and English, half uttered words that drifted away in the night. A train of ammunition wagons strove to find a way to the front, but were swept back in the débacle.

In farmhouses lights sprang up; there was the sound of women's voices and of children crying. Flocks of sheep driven by their masters joined the confused procession and the air was filled with the soft bellowing of cattle, their horns tied together by lengths of rope in an effort to prevent them straying.

Piles of equipment, guns, helmets, knapsacks, masks, littered the ground. Ahead the road was blocked by a huge gun, its caterpillar treads firmly embedded in a mudhole; but already the traffic had beaten a hard path around it through an open field. A thin line of men worked frantically, making a shallow trench, and others tore their hands trying to string barbed wire in the deceptive moonlight.

For a moment the traffic halted and a woman sprang up beside Peter's car, her arms outstretched pleadingly.

"My babies!" she cried. "Take my babies!"

Without waiting for permission she raised the canvas curtain at the back and thrust in two children who plopped hard on the board floor.

"*Attendez!*" she said with authority and hurried off toward the farmhouse by the roadside, her skirt swishing about her ankles, her heavy shoes clumping.

But Peter did not dare wait. Already the line was moving again, two ambulances had passed him and behind him the driver of a camion was shouting menacingly. Through the fever that now sang in his veins, the American was conscious of but one thing. He must not again lose his outfit. Twice he yelled despairingly at the farmhouse, but no one came and he started his car. Behind him the babies began to cry in unison.

He had almost caught up with the dim outline of the forward ambulance when there came a droning roar that broke the startled night, and Peter stopped his car with a jerk. Every other vehicle on the road stopped also. Those who were on foot ran to the fields and those who were imprisoned on their drivers' seats cowered and prayed.

The gray shadow of an airplane swooped overhead and its machine gun began to spray the road. In the back of the car the babies cried more lustily than before, bringing pricking drops of horror to Peter's skin.

"Hush up you!" he whispered severely, not realizing that no sound could pierce the clatter from above. "Hush up!"

In the ditches some French soldiers were taking futile rifle shots at the airplane. After thirty seconds which seemed an hour the aviator hummed off in the distance, leaving death behind him. Peter began to drive forward slowly although the road was quite empty now, people fearing to return to the scene of this sudden slaughter. It was bad enough. A half dozen bodies lay in the moonlight contorted into awkward angles. On the bank a man tried to bandage his leg with strips torn from his shirt. He could hardly walk, but when the ambulance came into view he leaped up with unexpected agility and demanded to be taken somewhere—anywhere so long as it was away from this spot. Clambering down from his seat, Peter helped him into the back of the car where he settled down comfortably in the darkness among the babies.

Farther on an ammunition wagon was overturned, one horse lying on his side, his legs stiff. The other walked slowly across the road and leaned against the radiator of Peter's car. Blood poured from a gash in his neck forming a dark stain where it fell on the gray road, and he turned sad, bewildered eyes on the man as if asking what it was all about.

"Go along!" Peter commanded, anxious to follow the last of the ambulances which had disappeared. "Giddap!"

But the horse was beyond hearing human commands. Presently he staggered to the side of the road and fell down.

"It's a good thing he didn't die in the middle," Peter thought and pushed on the gas.

There was no sign of the ambulance section now and he realized that once again he was lost. He came to a crossroads and at random chose the one leading right. They were both filled with refugees.

At intervals he shouted at them hopefully, "Château Thierry? Château Thierry?" but they did not answer, staring at him dully, stunned by the misery of this catastrophe that had befallen them.

The road which seemed always to be leading down hill gradually became empty again. He was leaving the refugees behind. Now and again he dozed at the wheel of his car, coming back to consciousness with a jerk when it swerved from the road. Sleep was becoming an overwhelming necessity which dragged him down, forcing his eyes closed with relentless fingers. For a time he tried to reckon how little sleep he had had in the last week, but the calculations turned to a silly song which lulled him more:

"Four and twenty hours sitting in a pie," he hummed, and laughed at the foolishness of it. Behind him the man and the babies were silent. They might be dead, but Peter did not care about that. He had forgotten them.

The moon sank and the gray walls of a town reared up before him. For a moment he had the hope that this might be the place where the lieutenant had ordered him to report, but the name painted on the first wall was Jaulgonne. He got down stiffly from the seat of his car to seek information. Curious that his feet should be so heavy and his head so light. At the sound of his engine the door of a house opened and an old woman came out, fully dressed, very bent, with a shawl fastened over her head. She was leading two goats tied together by a string.

"I hear there is a great retreat," she muttered through toothless gums. "One says the Germans are upon us. Is it true, soldier?"

By some curious means she had already heard the rumor, although the town still lay sleeping calmly about her, unaware of its danger.

"It is true," Peter told her. "Very near."

"Save my goats!" she shrilled then, clutching at his arm. "Save my beautiful goats!"

She pulled the animals forward. Their smooth little horns rubbed against the wheel of the car making a grating noise.

"I can not oblige," Peter said politely in English which he then translated into French. "In the car is already a dead man and two babies."

"My beautiful goats," she moaned uncomprehending.

A terrible and unreasoning anger filled the man. Suddenly his body seemed to be enveloped in flame and he was no longer sleepy.

"Babies!" he shouted at her fiercely. "Babies! Babies!"

The old woman looked in the back of the car to assure herself that this foreign soldier was not lying.

"But babies!" she exclaimed contemptuously. "They give nothing of value. Goats give milk. You had better take my goats."

"How far is it to Château Thierry?" Peter asked.

"Farther on," she answered vaguely. "At the end of the countryside. I shall stay here until some one saves my beautiful goats."

She squatted down by the edge of the road, staring patiently ahead. The goats nuzzled closer, butting each other playfully.

Peter's anger left him. He now felt nothing but a numb indifference to this ride that would never end.

"Oh, well," he muttered. "I guess I can stand a little bit more."

IV

WITH the rising of the sun he entered Château Thierry. The town lay on the bank of the Marne, smooth and gray in the morning light, very old and peaceful. But already there were little knots of people gathered in the streets and the excited clamor of voices rose. Faster than the troops that fled, faster even than the motor cars that preceeded them, the rumor of disaster had already reached the town.

Peter stopped his ambulance at a fountain and got down to drink. His throat was parched with dust and again the pain of tiny knives was stabbing at his unhealed lungs. The car, too, needed water; a thin white steam rose from the radiator cap and the hood was too hot to bear touching. While he was about this the back of the ambulance was unfastened and the wounded soldier climbed out. He hobbled away without a word of thanks, and Peter realized with impersonal amusement that he did not even know the name of this man whose life had literally been saved through the accident of their meeting. At least he had kept the babies comparatively quiet. Now with their companion gone they set up a tired squalling again.

Peter went to the back of the car and looked at them dubiously. He was no expert on babies' ages, but one he judged was about three, the other hardly a year old. They lay together on the blue coat which the wounded soldier had considerately left for them, their small faces begrimed and tear-streaked. They were weary, frightened and hungry and they announced these facts to the world loudly.

The problem of caring for them obsessed him. If their mother ever got through he would have no means of knowing her; he doubted that she would know him. In the darkness they had hardly seen each other. A board nailed to a wall with the word "hospital" and an arrow pointing solved his problem, and he drove down the street to the entrance of the big ugly building.

Here the staff was all awake, and boxes of supplies—instruments, ether, bandages, were being moved out and piled into a waiting motor lorry. Peter picked up his charges gingerly and placed them on the steps where they immediately fell against each other and went to sleep in the early sunshine. Then he caught hold of the coat of a doctor dressed in white who was in charge of the moving.

"Here are two babies," he began painfully, his throat rough and hoarse.

The doctor hardly spared a glance.

"Take them away," he commanded. "They are yours."

"Like —— they are!" Peter cried indignantly and retreated to his ambulance. From a safe distance he watched them being carried inside the hospital by a reluctant nurse. Then with relief he set out to find his missing outfit.

They were parked in a square where a statue of La Fontaine, his nose broken and one arm gone, looked down benevolently on the nervous crowd beneath him. The Americans were lounging about, smoking and talking of their adventures. They seemed in a happy mood and Peter soon discovered why.

"Hey! Here's Fallon!" Hastings shouted and offered him a bottle of champagne. "Have a drink, kid, you look all in."

"Where 'ja get it?" Peter demanded suspiciously, stunned by this generosity.

Hastings waved his hand vaguely.

"A French soldier gave it to me. There's lots more. Some one's busted into a wine shop back on the rue de l'Eglise."

The sparkling wine cooled Peter's throat and sent little electric tinglings from his neck to his heels. His exhaustion vanished. He drank again deeply. Lieutenant Nelson walked up to them.

"You want to lay off that stuff," he said indifferently. "I'm glad you got through, Fallon. Have you seen anything of Eagan, Whittaker or Jessup? They haven't showed up yet."

"No, sir," Peter answered, and wondered why he had never realized before what a fine fellow this officer was.

"Well, stick around somewhere near," the lieutenant told them generally. "I don't know when we haul out or where. Perhaps Lieutenant Noyer will get orders during the day."

His opinion of the French officer, not expressed, was that he would never get anything or anywhere. This liaison was not noted for its cordiality.

"By the way," he continued, "the cooks are preparing some sort of mess in the back yard of that house over there. Go and get it if you want it."

But Peter did not want food. The thought of it affected him with a slight nausea, and to counteract this he drained the bottle and tossed it away. Now he felt like a very king among men; never before had he felt so well. The searing pain of his sore lungs was gone and he laughed at the thought of it contemptuously. Now he was no longer tired. The jingling of money in his pocket reminded him pleasantly that he was rich.

"I do believe it's my birthday!" he exclaimed gaily. "May thirtieth an' my birthday. I'm goin' to buy myself a present."

He walked off with a swagger, his eyes bright. The other men looked after him speculatively.

"Hit him like a ton of brick. Just like that."

"Oh, well, there's more for the rest of us."

Before a shop marked *Horlogerie* Peter paused and looked in the window. It was filled with rings, wedding bands, silver flasks, clocks and watches. One of the watches caught his eye. It was square with an illuminated dial and a silver face. A metal bracelet was designed to clasp it about the lucky owner's wrist. Peter thought that he had never seen anything so beautiful. He looked at the broken watch which he still carried.

"Hot dog!" he muttered. "That'll knock 'em cold."

Then with assured step he entered the shop. Behind the counter a red-faced woman with coarse gray hair was already packing her stock preparatory to moving. A large mole adorned her chin and her teeth were not good.

"*Bon jour, Madame,*" Peter said politely and touched his cap. "How much is this watch here?"

He pointed to a duplicate of the one in the window in a show case.

"Sixty francs," she answered and continued her packing.

"But that is too much," he said. "Do you know that there is a great retreat? The Germans have won. The war is almost over."

"I know it well enough," she told him sourly. "Why didn't you hold the line. If you had fought instead of leaving it all to our poor French we would not have to be moving now."

Fortunately Peter understood very little of this.

"How much for the watch?" he asked again.

"Sixty francs, I told you," she snapped.

Slowly he left the shop. It was evident that you could not buy a sixty-franc watch for thirty even during a retreat. It annoyed him that this ugly woman could be so stubborn.

Ten minutes later he entered the shop again.

"*Bon jour,*" he smiled.

"*Bon jou',*" she grunted glancing up at him.

"I have just heard," Peter said persuasively in his best French, "some late news."

"*Ah oui?*" She was all interest now.

"A *courrier* has told me that the line is broken from Fismes to Rheims. The Germans are advancing rapidly."

She shrieked at that.

"*Quelle horreur!*" Oh, this is frightful!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Peter answered. "The Germans will steal everything. I will buy the watch for thirty francs."

"Forty," she answered. "I will sell it to Monsieur for forty. No less."

"No," he answered firmly.

He did not return to the shop for a half an hour. The effect of the champagne was wearing off, he felt dizzy and his legs were numb. A French soldier, very drunk, offered him a flask of cognac in an access of fraternal feeling, and as the hot glow centered in his stomach and began to radiate Peter felt better.

He wandered about the town watching the evacuation which was now in full swing. Here a bank was moving its currency in a camion under armed guard, there the personnel of a military hospital was going, a line of stretchers and walking wounded flanked by nurses. Shops were closing and whole families worked, piling household goods which there was no means of moving on the side walks. Military police hurried about roughly ordering it returned.

The town was filling with cattle being driven in from the country and already the stone bridge over the Marne was black with a steadily moving stream of people fleeing to Meaux or Montmirail and safety. Men pushed old women in baby carriages and wheelbarrows. Children staggered along under incredible loads which would be abandoned; women marched stolidly, nursing babies as they walked. There was no sound of crying, no anger. Before this catastrophe the inhabitants of Château Thierry were dazed and silent. Underneath the bridge a company of sappers worked steadily, mining the structure.

Presently Peter returned to the jewelry shop. He had not forgotten the watch he coveted.

"The Germans are at Jaulgonne," he told the woman with the mole mendaciously. "Now I have to go. Will you sell the watch for thirty francs?"

"Thief! Robber! *Espece desalaud!*" she shouted waving her fist at him. "I will lose everything. Take the watch for thirty francs!"

Gravely he paid her and strapped it on his wrist.

"If you were a man," he said pleasantly in English, "I would plant a beezer on your nose that would make you sick for a week."

Never, he felt, had he seen so ugly a woman. Although he had won, he felt only unlimited hatred and contempt for the entire company of French shopkeepers. They had robbed him often enough.

Outside the shop again he felt suddenly ill. The champagne and cognac combined with lack of food and fatigue poison was working with deadly effect. It was impossible to walk another step. Beyond the shop at the end of the street was a little house almost on the bank of the Marne which flowed by it sparkling and blue. The door gaped. Probably it was already deserted by its owners.

"If I can only get five minutes' sleep I'll be all right," Peter muttered and dragged himself toward it. "Just five minutes."

It was empty as he had thought and the semi-darkness of the room he entered was grateful to his smarting, red-rimmed eyes. In the corner a mattress had been flung down and Peter sank on it.

"Just five minutes," he whispered. "I can't go on now. I'm all in."

Once he looked affectionately at his new watch, then he closed his eyes. A soft humming filled his ears; twice his legs twitched spasmodically, then he slept.

V

THE muffled roar of an explosion awoke him. He believed it at first to be a part of his dream, but in the distance sounded the thin rattle of rifle fire. Peter started to his feet, only to lean against the wall weakly. His head was spinning; it was burning hot. Dimly he knew that he was ablaze with fever. A voice spoke—

"That will be the bridge over the Marne."

Peter whirled. Behind him was a woman, her bulk overflowing the chair on which she was sitting. In the dusk he recognized the proprietress of the jewelry shop. The mole on her chin stood out prominently in the dimness. The afternoon sun, slanting through a shuttered window, cast a pale gridiron on the floor.

"Doubtless they have destroyed it," she continued placidly.

"What does it mean?" Peter cried.

He spoke in English, but she understood him.

"The Germans have entered Château Thierry," she said. "Doubtless Monsieur knew they would. Did you not tell me they were at Jaulgonne this morning?"

"The Germans! Here? And you let me sleep?" Now he knew that he was trapped and that this woman was responsible. He pushed past her to the door, but she had risen and with amazing quickness flung herself against it.

"Fool!" she whispered. "Go out and you will be killed! They are in the town itself."

"You let me sleep," he muttered dully. "You let me sleep."

"Yes, but it was already too late when I found you and now there is work for you to do."

She spoke English quite correctly, but with an accent. And this morning he had bombarded her with his clumsy French!

"Listen," she whispered and came closer to him so that her chin with the mole almost touched his cheek. "I have here a paper which the French command must have. On it are figures—battalions, regiments, guns—the German strength and some positions. How I got them is not necessary for you to know, but the French command must have it."

Her voice, sinking lower, became fierce.

"Are you big enough to take it, little American? Can you do that much for France?" She peered into his freckled face and the tired eyes. "Or will an old woman have to find another way?" she asked mockingly as he hesitated.

Peter stiffened.

"How?" he demanded. Now he knew that he was dealing with a spy—one of those people who lived quietly for years, unsuspected, until the need for them arose.

"You must swim the Marne. There is no other way. Can you swim?" she asked with sudden anxiety.

Peter nodded. His memory swept back to the Hudson, years ago it seemed, before there was a war.

"*Bien!*" It is necessary to go now. By night the bank will be well patrolled. Even now they may see you. If they fire, swim deep."

Peter shivered, but it was the alternate waves of heat and cold that were sweeping him.

"But you are afraid?"

Desperately she stabbed at his pride.

"Give me the paper," he said roughly.

"So. Like this I will place it in the back of the watch, the new watch. It will be safe." She unstrapped it from his wrist, laughing softly. "Hurry, soldier."

Quickly he slid out of his clothes until he had on only his drawers. A feverish excitement had invaded him. There was no consciousness of sex between them. They were no longer man and woman.

"Give the paper to Ravel if he is there, but any officer will do. Tell them that Madame Simonet sent it. They will know. Ravel. Simonet." She repeated the words.

Then she led him through the house to a rear door. Below them the Marne slipped past. Peter paused.

"But you," he demanded. "If they see me swimming from here, if they get me, they will know that you——" he hesitated.

"*Demain matin a la bonne heure,*" she murmured, and for the moment her ugly face lighted as she thought of the rising sun that would glint along rifle barrels.

Peter did not understand, but he was strangely moved. There were, after all, braver things in this war than just fighting.

"I thought you were an old hag," he said awkwardly, "but now I think you're a —— fine-lookin' woman."

The tall lush grass in the little yard behind the house was cool to his naked body as he wriggled through it. The door of the house which had opened but a crack had closed again and he was alone in a quiet world. The rattle of rifles, the faint drum of distant artillery had for the moment ceased. The afternoon sun, sinking, cast oblique rays through the golden haze.

Peter slipped into the Marne with hardly a ripple and the cold water of it sent a thrill of shivering protest surging through him, and now he was awake. It seemed as if he would never need to sleep again. His brain worked with the precision of a machine clicking. Three forward strokes and he quietly submerged.

Currents were pulling at his body, drawing him downstream. For a moment he did not know in which direction he was swimming and he let himself drift. His lungs were expanding, like inflated bladders it seemed, which would force him to the surface by their very lightness. Now they were filled with piercing needles and he knew again all the old pain of the searing gas. It tore at him until he could endure no more; then he rose to the surface, his lungs taking in air in choking gasps.

For a time he floated, arms and legs barely moving, his head a rusty splotch on the water. Turning on his back he looked at the town, more distant now. It lay, gray and quiet, unmoved by war save where to the north a column of smoke arose, growing thicker and spreading out in the still air, fan-shaped. The town lay, indifferent, dead apparently, but to Peter it was as if a thousand eyes peered, watching his every movement. Panic caught him and he began to swim frantically with clumsy strokes.

The bank he had left was still so near.

Something clipped the water near him with a *zip* and again to the right just beyond his shoulder. But there was no sound of a report. Not until the third bullet whined overhead did Peter realize that they were firing at him at last. Without taking a breath he dived again.

Now he swam under water for so long that his brain ceased to function and he forgot why he was there. Only a subconscious reaction forced him to remain beneath the surface. His ears were drumming with steady beats and his eyeballs were like starting balls of fire that gave no light. He believed that he was dying, but it was a matter of no importance. He could stand, it seemed, far off viewing it impersonally.

It was no conscious motion of his own that forced him to the surface again where he lay face down like a dead man, his head slightly turned to suck in air through a corner of his mouth.

As he appeared a veritable clatter of rifle fire broke out from the distant bank, but Peter was beyond caring for that. He drifted, his arms barely moving in an automatic motion. Something scratched his neck and he awoke with a scream—a scream that ended in a gurgle as his throat gulped in the soiled river water. It was only the branch of a tree drifting past on an aimless voyage. Peter sank again.

When he rose for the third time he was close to the opposite bank and there was a dark shadow above him where the platform of a boathouse projected over the water. His feet were touching bottom; they were embedded in mud and strangely he seemed incapable of moving them. With a painful effort he pulled himself forward, grasping the spiles until he was under the shelter. One bullet thudded into the wood above.

He was climbing up a muddy bank which smeared his naked body with a slimy coating. Once he slipped and it seemed an infinity of time before he regained the same place again. His drawers were torn in strips, held together by the waistband, and Peter was dimly conscious of his nakedness. Then he was standing erect in the evening light. He staggered forward almost into the arms of two French soldiers who, with fixed bayonets, regarded him with startled eyes.

"Ravel," he whispered. "Ravel."

They were talking together, pointing and arguing. But at least they understood.

"Come," one of them said. "I will take you. Colonel Ravel is beyond in the big house, the regimental headquarters."

"I guess I can stand to get there," Peter said.

But he could not. At the first step he sagged to his knees and vomited, his body retching with nausea. Then the soldier raised him and supported him forward, an arm around his chest. Now there was complete sympathy in his glance.

They entered the large room of the house at last. The group of officers gathered about the table stared, startled by this river-soaked creature drooping on the arm of a French soldier. It filled Peter with sudden rage that they should be eating instead of studying their maps. While he was dying out there in the Marne they were eating.

"What do you want?" somebody asked.

"Ravel!" he thought he shouted, but his voice was only a croak. "—— it, I want Ravel!"

A man, small with a dark alert face, his uniform having the insignia of a colonel, stepped forward.

"I am Ravel," he said curtly.

"Something," Peter said, "from Simonet. Madame Simonet."

Slowly he unstrapped the watch from his wrist and infinitely, slowly he unscrewed the back. They watched him with curious eyes. Then he took out the bit of oiled paper with drops of water clinging to it and handed it to the man before him. They crowded around exclaiming now.

"*Mon Dieu*, what have we here?"

"Simonet! Brave woman! She got it through!"

"We must telephone at once to de Maulde."

They had forgotten Peter who stood in the middle of the room, the mud drying on him, but the soldier, who was not concerned with the doings of staff officers, who, indeed, hardly knew what they were for, wrapped a blanket about him. His teeth were clicking now and he stood upright with difficulty waiting until they should decide what was to be done with him. To force back the dizziness that was engulfing him he stared intently at his watch. A thin trickle of water dripped from the works, the face had been broken in his scramble up the bank and the hands had stopped at the moment he had entered the Marne. A cry burst from him:

"My watch! My swell new watch! Oh, I can't stand no more!"

His legs weakened and he slipped to his knees, his head buried in the blanket while bitter sobs tore at his chest. Tears streamed down his dirty face. The officers gathered around him again.

"He is drunk," one suggested tentatively. "Or insane?"

But Colonel Ravel turned him over, touching his pulse and laying a cool hand on his head.

"No," he answered with authority. "Sick perhaps, and exhausted. *Mon Dieu*, to swim the Marne under fire! Presently he will sleep and later he can be questioned further."

He said more, but Peter heard only one word. Sleep. Gradually his sobs grew less. He had been weeping for something that was broken, but he had forgotten what.

He had forgotten too about his outfit that was lost, and the old woman with the mole who would stand against a wall in the morning. Sleep. It rose in soft black waves about him, enveloping him, drawing him gently down. Some one was forcing cognac down his throat and he shook his head in drowsy protest against the stinging liquor. They were carrying him somewhere and the swaying motion lulled him more. Sleep, at last. It was rising—to his chin, his mouth, his eyes. The lids quivered once. Then Peter Fallon dropped into deep darkness and peace.

Slants on LIFE

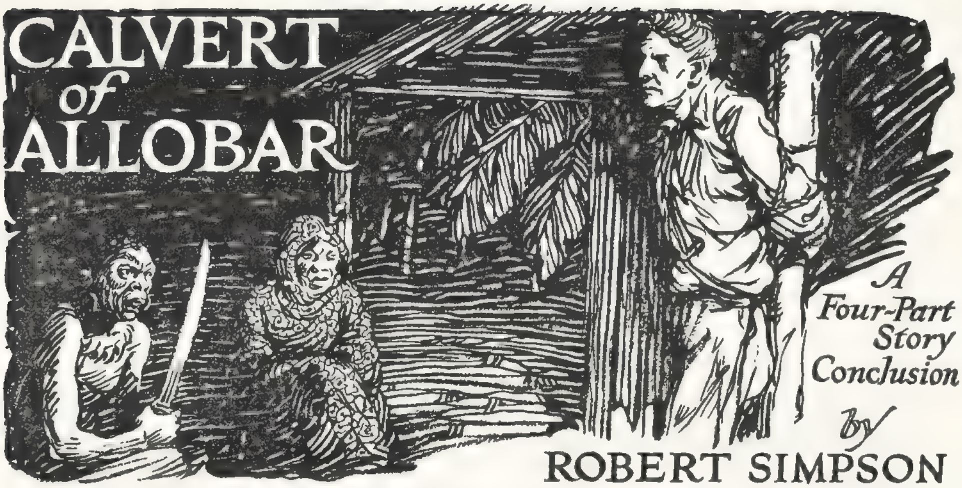
by Bill Adams

A FRIEND

MY FRIEND the undertaker is one of the cheeriest folks I ever met. I have never seen a frown upon his face. He is forever smiling of complete and serene contentment. He has learned the secret of life from the silent faces of the dead—and thus he laughs in every sort of weather. He is the sort of man across whose hands bees will stroll without stinging him, realizing the sweetness of the flowers that lie within his peaceful spirit. I am attached to him.

He has a way, after a funeral is over, of rubbing his chubby hands together and when you meet him aside of deliberately winking at you, saying, as it were, "Sorrow's a gem—a gem—a regular jewel—ain't life lovely? And as for death—why, what is there prettier than the look of happiness upon the sleeper's face? The whole thing is just simply a flower—life and death together."

Make a friend of him—he knows the secret.



CALVERT of ALLOBAR

A Four-Part Story Conclusion

by

ROBERT SIMPSON

Author of "The Gray Charteris," "Bad Business," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form

JOHN "JOCK" TODD, agent for the African Produce Association, and his wife, Bella, sat on the veranda, looking out on Allobar Creek. All Allobar was stirred up by the incidents of the previous night, when Calvert, agent for Paller and Co., had been confronted on the creek by a terrifying blue light operated by some unknown natives.

As they talked Calvert, immaculately dressed, appeared on their wharf. After laconic greetings, Calvert, who was despised for his drunken life and association with the natives, asked that he might talk with Zatza the Pure, the native woman who attended Bella.

But from the superannuated Zatza, Calvert learned nothing of what was going on in the natives' minds, or of what he already knew. That the natives had announced their presence the night before by *obumandu*, or the decapitation of two slaves, a custom of the priesthood of N'ri of Ibo-land.

Zatza gone, Calvert again told them of seeing the blue light the night before, of having his canoe upset; but he did not tell them that he was drunk, or that he was on his way to see Ruth Kenley, sister of Walter Kenley, the district commissioner.

Suddenly he stopped talking, then cried:

"Well, I'll be ——! Isn't he— Just a minute, Jock. I want to look closer at that chap."

Calvert strode down the steps and approached a native who had appeared on the wharf. He was the same youth he had seen the night before on his own beach.

Calvert learned that the native was from Nishi and was called Biko; that he was to become house boy for Captain Dick Talbot of the West African Frontier Force.

Afterward Calvert did not mention the peculiar fiber anklet worn by the native, marking him as one in authority.

After dinner Walter Kenley came to Todd's beach and asked that Bella be sent to stay the night with Ruth. Kenley informed the two men that all the whites had been summoned to the government beach, because he feared a native uprising, at the instigation of one called Akka-Chuku.

Bella and Calvert went by gig to the government beach, Jock promising to follow later. At the beach they were met by MacConnachie of the Public Works Department.

He asked the honor of escorting Bella to the Kenleys and showed his hostility to Calvert's accompanying her.

Calvert and Bella refused his offer bluntly and made off toward the house. MacConnachie leaned against the wharf rail.

"Calvert!" he muttered unbelievingly. "Calvert!"

And after a minute or so, when the gig had drifted away from the wharf—

"Something's going to break, sure as ——!"

CALVERT left Bella with Ruth. Over and over in his mind echoed a refrain:

"Tomorrow at four! Tomorrow at four!"

Ruth Kenley had asked him to tea the next day, him, Calvert, white and all but outcast. If he could keep sober, he'd go, he told himself.

His first thought was to get back to his own beach, however.

At the waterfront he met Walter Kenley and reported that he had left Bella with Ruth. At that moment MacConnachie intruded.

"Better give Calvert a bottle and a dark corner and then you'll be sure he's accounted for," laughed MacConnachie.

"MacConnachie," said Calvert very slowly, "your suggestion is excellent. If you'll find the bottle, I'll have no trouble in producing the dark corner."

MacConnachie was not expecting this answer, and said raspingly—

"Get up the beach, you swine!"

Then Calvert hit him. MacConnachie went down, unconscious.

A second later and Calvert was worming his way

"*Calvert of Allobar*," *copyright, 1925, by Robert Simpson.*

through the brush to get to the beach from which he could take a canoe for his own beach.

Suddenly he stopped.

About a thirty-second of an inch from his throat was the point of a long nastily thin knife. His eyes followed up its edge to the small hand which grasped it.

Then he said casually, amiably—

"Hello—Lali!"

Lali, the daughter of Chief Okpari, had been driven from the beaches on Allobar Creek some time before after telling that Jock Todd was the father of her sister's child. This lie had never reached the ears of Bella. And in Lali's disgrace, Calvert had been the only person who had befriended her.

Now she offered to aid him to his own beach, and he accepted the offer, hoping to get information from her about the impending uprising, for it was known that Lali was closely associated with the Akka-Chuku's defi to the government.

Calvert learned only one thing: That in Ibo-land there was a rift in the plan of uprising, occasioned by the mutual hatred of Zatza the Pure and Lali, both of whom were important personages.

As they approached the waterside, they were challenged by a native sentry. In a moment Lali disappeared into the brush.

But on the side of the sentry's clearing away from the fugitives a twig cracked. The guard started toward the sound. He let out a yell and dropped his rifle. Then Lali and Calvert were slipping through the brush again toward the canoes. Lali, animal-like, had sunk her teeth into the ligament above the sentry's heel!

Easily the two made their way to Calvert's beach, not knowing that they were being followed by Zatza the Pure and Biko, Biko who had called off the sentry but a short time before.

When they reached the beach, Calvert made off toward the bungalow. Lali stayed in the canoe.

A half hour later Calvert returned to the canoe and found Lali in a serious physical condition. Her back had been cut to shreds by a hippo-hide thong, the cuts augmented by a knife. He took her to the bungalow, where he had medical supplies for emergencies.

Late that night Todd came to Calvert's beach to offer his assistance, should MacConnachie make trouble for Calvert. He was surprized and angry at finding Lali there, though his anger somewhat tempered by learning of her condition.

When Calvert started back to the bungalow, after saying good-night to Todd, the native drums had quieted down to a mere murmur.

NEXT morning Biko came to Calvert's bungalow. With native shrewdness he flattered Calvert by pronouncing that in him was joined the wisdom of the white and the black, and that in him there was a kingdom.

But this did not save Biko, whom Calvert now believed to be Akka-chuku. Calvert knocked him down and tied him up.

Then he went back to Lali, who had recovered sufficiently to tell him that her castigation of the night before had been inflicted by Biko and Zatza.

When Biko came to, he almost wriggled free, but was caught and tied to the legs of the table by Calvert. Then in sullenness Biko lay and stared into space. Seemingly he was trying to send a telepathic message.

The answer came in the form of Zatza, leading more than fifty natives. When the natives saw Calvert's rifle, they slunk off and left Zatza the Pure with Calvert.

As Calvert prodded Zatza along the path to the bungalow, he became aware of a launch tied up at his gig-wharf.

"Hunh!" he said, poking Zatza in the back with the rifle. "Just like a policeman. Always show up when the shooting's over!"

He went into the bungalow where he found MacConnachie and Kenley, the latter just having untied Biko. The two men heard Calvert's story and would not believe it. They did not believe Calvert's repeated—

"Biko is Akka-chuku!"

They were so careless of Calvert's opinion of Biko that they failed to notice that Biko had moved toward the door. In a moment he had leaped out and was gone through the bush.

Only with Biko's disappearance did the government men become concerned. They knew one thing: Tomorrow all Allobar would be laughing at them for letting Biko escape.

It was five o'clock when they reached the government beach. Calvert was installed in the annex, Zatza in jail and Lali in the hospital. From the veranda of the Kenley bungalow Bella saw the cavalcade arrive and asked Ruth if she might go to the hospital and see who the patient was.

At the hospital a self-important native clerk stirred Bella's curiosity by referring to the story about Jock Todd and Lali.

After dinner Todd came to say good night to Bella, and she asked him about Lali. In his anger he told her to be quiet, to stop talking. He left her to go to the annex to see Calvert.

Bella sat motionless on the veranda until Ruth Kenley came out. Ruth had just heard the story of her brother's fiasco at Calvert's beach.

When Ruth began her usual patronizing patter, Bella broke forth in a torrent of denunciation of Ruth's superciliousness, and in a rage left the veranda.

While she went across the clearing to the hospital Ruth dispatched a note to Dick Talbot at the annex, telling him of the scene.

Bella went straight to Lali, who, when she saw the look of anger in Bella's eyes, broke out in a confession of guilt over her lie. Somehow, Bella understood.

A few minutes later Dr. Allen, coming in, found Bella singing Lali to sleep.

"Really, Mrs. Todd," Dr. Allen said, "you shouldn't have come here. Your husband is looking for you. You mustn't be found here. Can't you understand that I—that you——"

"Oh, I'm going! But, losh, mon, what a guilty conscience ye've got! And what awfu' conceit!"

"Well, confound it! When I said that I was coming here, both Todd and Calvert looked so horribly sispicious and queer——"

"Oh, is Mr. Calvert sober?"

"Mostly."

The voice was not Allen's. It came from beyond the open door.

CHAPTER XXII

TOO POSITIVE

DR. ALLEN twisted his head around so sharply that Bella distinctly heard the bones click.

"Good evening, Mrs. Todd. 'Lo Allen. I'm glad you found her. I thought she'd be here."

"What the —— do you mean?"

Calvert, as yet apparently not fully awake, stood in the open doorway, filling it almost completely. He looked first at Bella, rather than at the doctor whose indignation said so much. But there was no indignation in Bella's eyes; only a bubbling laughter that did not make a sound.

"Nothin, Doc', nothing," Calvert returned dryly. "But I know Mrs. Todd has a weakness for hospitals. They excite her curiosity, I think."

Then to Bella simply:

"John's looking for you down at the wharf. Better not keep him waiting too long."

"Oh, thank ye. Guid nicht, Dr. Allen. Mind ye take good care o' that Lali girl."

Allen did not understand this, and did not try; and had he seen Bella actually swinging on Calvert's arm as they passed through the dark of the government beach lawn, he would have misunderstood that still better.

"Losh! I'm glad to see ye! But how did ye know I'd be at the hospital?"

"Um—well, I knew there was a lady in the hospital you were probably interested in. So did John. That's why he sent me up this way, as well as Allen, instead of coming up himself. He—er—he was afraid he'd find you."

A pause during which Bella began to hum softly and absently swing on Calvert's arm.

"She—that is—Lali—I assume the worst is yet to come?"

Bella stopped swinging, but continued to hum a little while longer.

"I quarreled wi' Miss Kenley," she announced frankly, "and I'm not speakin' to John."

"Not——"

"No," precisely. "He told me to haud my tongue. So I'm doin' it."

"But you can't keep that up!"

"No? Ye'll see. Or rather, John will. What did he have to say about me quarrelin' wi' Miss Kenley?"

"Nothing much. Seemed to expect it. He's going to take you back to your own beach."

"That's kind o' him, seein' as I couldna—I mean could not very well sleep outdoors."

Calvert laughed, but Bella asked at once:

"What are you doin' down here? I never thought ye'd let them catch ye, at least no' that easy. Were ye sleepin'?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I'm down on private business."

"Oh," flatly. "That sounds awfu' suspicious to me. And I suppose the fightin's like to be all off?"

"I think so," Calvert lied easily. "You'll be safe enough on your own beach. Did you—er—have any luck at the hospital?"

Bella did not hum this time. They were almost directly in line with the Kenley bungalow, and her eyes shifted in that direction for a little while. Then she asked simply enough—

"If I'm not speakin' to John, how can I tell him to stop botherin' about that Lali lassie?"

Calvert glanced down at her quickly, wondered what manner of woman she was, then drew a deep and silent breath of relief for John's sake.

"Just tell him. That's simple enough."

"But I'm not speakin' to him."

"Oh, but Mrs. Todd, that's——"

"Could ye tell him? Give him a nudge or a wink or—no, that'll no' do. It'll take more than a wink or a nudge to convince John. And mind ye, Mr. Calvert, I know him. He'll bother about that thing and bother about it, till there'll be no livin' wi' him. How can I tell him not to be such a sheep?"

"You could write it down," Calvert suggested hopefully.

Bella shook her head.

"I didn't say I was a dummy, Mr. Calvert. If I can write it down, I can speak it. I'm no' one to like half a herrin' if I've made up my mind to a whole one."

"You're really serious about this, Mrs. Todd?"

"Och, you're as stubborn as John! Of course, I'm serious. What would I be askin' ye to tell him for, if——"

Then quickly and softly:

"Will ye tell him? Ye're an awfu' clever man, Mr. Calvert. Surely a man as clever as you could do a thing like that cannily—

you know? Wi' a touch o' delicacy, like—like—och, like paintin' an awfu' fine sunset or dancin' lichts—I mean lights on the water. Will ye, Mr. Calvert?" more softly. "I wouldna like John to go on botherin' and hurtin' himsel' the way he's doin'."

Calvert looked down at her again as they stepped on to the main concrete path and headed for the wharf. Then he laughed quietly in his throat and asked—

"Why did you quarrel with Miss Kenley?"

"Oh, if I tell you that, will ye tell John?"

Calvert intended to take the depressing load off John's mind in any case, but he liked Bella to divulge herself as she was doing, and he was curious not only to know why she and Ruth Kenley had quarreled, but also to learn why Bella had so obviously disliked Ruth from their first meeting. So, in exchange for a promise that he would tell John, Bella said briefly:

"I quarreled wi' Miss Kenley because I'm no' jumpin' jack to be laughed at by a snob." An expressive pause. "And though it's no' my business to warn ye—she's no' frien' o' yours."

"No?" quietly and with a slight upward jerk of the head that Bella did not see.

"No, she isn't. Didn't John tell ye?"

"What?"

"That they were goin' to—what did John tell ye?"

Calvert stopped directly in the middle of the path, and, though he was not aware of it, his tone altered rather sharply.

"What were they going to do?"

"Maybe—oh, I hope—didn't John tell ye *that?*"

Calvert glanced up and down the deserted path quickly. There was a hunted look in his eyes; the kind of look that suspects treachery.

"You tell me," quietly. "Go on. Quickly."

"Didn't John tell ye they were going to put ye oot!"

"Out!"

"Aye," fearfully, her eyes wide in amaze at the look on Calvert's face. "Didn't John tell ye *that!*"

"Out," Calvert repeated absently, his eyes shifting up and down the path. "Out like a——"

He stopped there, and Bella, watching his face, whispered:

"Oh, I shouldna have said it. I shouldna! But I thought John surely would tell you *that.*"

Calvert knew why John had not told him. And he also knew now why John had come all the way up river to invite him to stay at his beach. As a guest of the A. P. A., with John Todd as sponsor for him, he would be a trifle harder for Kenley to reach than as the agent for Paller & Co. John Todd was all right.

Then all at once he was grinning down at Bella and saying in a slightly high-pitched voice—

"And what did Miss Kenley have to say about it?"

"She said—" Bella stopped and looked up at him suspiciously. "We—we'd better be moving on. If any of the gossipy government bodies saw us standin' here so long——"

"What did she think of it?" Calvert persisted.

"Well—well, she wouldn't change her mind about it when I told her MacConnachie got you into a' that trouble because ye wouldn't let him walk up to the bungalow wi' me."

"You told her that!"

"I thought I should, seein' that that was the way o't."

"I see."

Calvert abruptly moved on again, his shoulders slouching a little.

"And it didn't make any difference?"

"No' a bit. But I dinna—I mean I do not like her. So, I'll not doubt but that I'm a wee bit prejudiced."

CALVERT, apparently, had nothing more to say on the subject. And for a dozen yards he had nothing to say on any subject. Then when a native policeman had gone scuffling past toward the barracks, and John Todd with a lamp-boy and some one who looked like Kenley became dimly outlined down at the gig-wharf, Calvert said almost gruffly:

"Not a word of this to anybody. Not even to John."

"I'm not speakin' to John."

"Fine!"

"It's not fine, Mr. Calvert. But I'm not speakin' to him for a' that."

Calvert threw back his head and laughed so that both John and the other man could hear him quite plainly. Then he said hurriedly in a low voice:

"Thank you for telling me, Mrs. Todd. About everything."

A pause, then very quietly—

"You won't go back on me, will you?"

"Me—I mean I! What—what made ye say that?"

"Nothin. Just don't do it."

"I'll not."

And Calvert was smiling when he stepped into the light of the lamp-boy's lantern.

"Good evening, Mrs. Todd," Kenley greeted Bella quite pleasantly as a result of the understanding talk he had just had with John. "Your husband thinks it will be perfectly all right for you to go home again and——"

"Home! To Abertinny?"

And Bella glanced quickly at John who was being drawn aside by Calvert to have some of the strained, actually frightened look removed from his face.

"No, no," Kenley assured her and laughed. "Just back to your own beach. And I'm glad to be able to say I think it will be all right, too."

"That's fine," Bella said tonelessly. "It wasna—I mean, was not much o' a war, was it?"

"No, not much. Er—you'll pardon me for rushing off, won't you? There is a man waiting for me in my office and—oh—er—Calvert? You'll be up in a few minutes? Thank you. Good night, Mrs. Todd. So glad to have had you with us, even if the occasion weren't the most cheerful."

"Good night, Mr. Kenley," carefully correct and in the same colorless voice. Then quickly to the lamp-boy—

"Where's the gig?"

"Just a meenit, Bella," John suggested hurriedly and almost timidly from a distance of several yards. "I'll help ye down the steps."

Bella obediently waited, without a sound. She could love and honor and obey a man, and keep all the Commandments, without speaking to him. Presently she was saying good night to Calvert who squeezed her hand till it hurt; while a surreptitious glimpse of John's face showed a kind of awe and penitence mingled—a most unusual and uncomfortable expression for John to wear.

"Guid nicht, Mr. Calvert. I'm awfu' glad ye put that auld witch Zatza in jail for me, and I hope ye'll come and have sup—I mean dinner wi' us again some time soon."

"Thank you."

This was when Calvert's grip hurt. And he was not certain of what he said after that, if he said anything at all.

Even the sight of Bella, so carefully refraining from speaking to John, who was handing her most cavalierly into the gig, could not make him smile at all convincingly.

"Guid nicht."

Something vaguely white like a hand that held a handkerchief fluttered out of the murk at him.

"Don't forget. We'll be lookin' for ye."

Then the swish of the oars and the click of them in the row-locks died out on the broad, black face of the river; and a kind of smothering loneliness seized Calvert with icy hands and shook him almost till his teeth chattered.

So he stood for a while by the water's edge, feeling not at all unlike a stray mongrel, his shoulders sagging, his head thrust loosely forward, his arms limply by his sides. And presently he might have been heard to mutter as he turned slowly in the direction of Kenley's office:

"Out! *Out!* Lord, what a rotten judge of a woman I am!"

THE man who was supposed to be waiting for Kenley in his office was Captain Talbot. But he had not arrived yet. He had been detained *en route*, and just then was slouching up and down the Kenley living-room, occasionally pausing at the glorified kitchen table to deposit cigaret ashes in the ash receiver.

Ruth was seated at the table, her chin cupped in her hands, her eyes now and then acknowledging that Talbot was in the room, but, most of the time, during this rather superheated pause, staring out through the open window at a perfect blot of black dark that contained nothing at all.

When Talbot had come in, he had just had a "minute." But at least half an hour had gone by since then and the discussion was not yet ended. In fact, it had only begun.

"But, good heavens, Ruth, I didn't say——"

"You can admire the woman without agreeing with her."

"But I didn't say I agreed. I simply said——"

"That everybody was not necessarily a fool or a clod."

"Clod! Never used the word in my life. Clod!"

"A fool or a clod simply because he or she did not happen to look at things as we did. Meaning that our point of view isn't necessarily the right one and that a woman like that has a right to lecture and insult me on my own veranda, call me a snob, hurl me aside like a clothes-tree, and still have enough of a point of view left to elicit words of commendation from you."

Talbot's mouth opened, but he swung away from the table again with a hopeless gesture. Words were not his specialty; not in bulk.

"Oh, there isn't a bit of use running away from it," Ruth persisted. "You do think she had some justification, else you wouldn't be so anxious to insist that she had any kind of viewpoint. And what on earth interest can the viewpoint of a woman like that have for you? A Lancashire mill girl or a Devonshire milkmaid——"

"Ruth!"

Talbot faced her sharply from the end of the room.

"Oh, rubbish, Dick. Dramatics won't do. If you've caught the same fever as MacConnachie and Dr. Allen and some of the rest of them, I'd much rather you were frank about it. And I shouldn't blame you half so much. It's this assumption of virtuous consideration for the clodhopper's viewpoint that aggravates me beyond words."

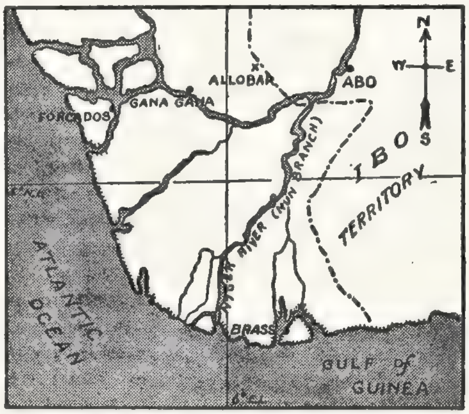
"Not beyond them," Talbot offered dryly, and calmly dropped his cigaret end into the receiver.

The momentary flash of life that had come into his eyes, had gone out again, leaving them the same sleepy gray and perhaps a trifle more somnolent than before.

"I detest that kind of humor," Ruth said decisively and rose as a steward scuffled his flat-footed way into Kenley's bedroom, remained there a moment or two, then scuffled his way out again. "Just as I detest subterfuge of any kind. You know perfectly well that she was wrong—utterly wrong. You know that she can not possibly have other than the most impertinent justification for presuming to judge my deportment.

"No education, no breeding, nothing whatever to recommend her but a country girl kind of prettiness and that detestable Scotch pawkiness that passes for cleverness among those who haven't discernment enough to see that it is just platitudinous drivel dressed up for sale in a kind of Harris tweed vocabulary!"

This was not meant to be funny. There was actual a livid passion behind it that was beginning to show in colorless lips and in eyes that were showering sparks of red-hot indignation.



"That isn't bad," Talbot declared, breaking a short, sharp pause. "Even if it is a bit stagey and bad tempered. But why take it out on me? I haven't a drop of Scotch in me. Not a drop."

"Oh, you're unbearable tonight!"

"I'm sorry!"

"You're not. You're too busy thinking up excuses for her point of view to have any time for being sympathetic toward mine. And—" coming round the table— "I'm getting a little weary of that attitude, Dick."

"Really, Ruth, I——"

"If Walter and I argue about this or that, you're always horribly anxious to show me Walter's side of it, without bothering to take more than the merest glance at mine."

"Great Scott!"

"And it's the same with everything and everybody I don't happen to like. Why do you do that? You didn't at first. Just lately. Why am I always more or less half wrong, while everybody else seems to be at least three-quarters right?"

This was an excellent chance for Talbot to remark that he had begun to suspect that it was quite unnecessary to say anything in favor of Ruth's point of view, because she was always at some considerable pains to leave nothing more to be said about it after she had concluded her own remarks upon it. But this would not only have been most unkind, but also unpardonably rude. So Talbot contented himself with:

"Really, I hadn't noticed. I'm sorry. Perhaps—that is—perhaps it's because you are a bit too positive about things."

"Positive! I? How on earth can I be too positive about that woman's horrible lack of breeding?"

"Well—oh, one just can't be too positive about anything, you know. Things change and turn upside down so devilishly—particularly out here. Oh, rot! Don't let's squabble. It's too confoundedly hot, and Kenley's waiting for me to have——"

The appearance of an orderly in the doorway was a most expressive interruption and before the orderly could say anything at all, Talbot drawled:

"All right. Tell D. C. I be down one time."

The orderly saluted and departed, and Ruth walked out to the veranda with the captain, trying to avoid words that would further prolong the conversation. But she had to keep her lips tightly shut to do it, and even then as she leaned thoughtfully against a veranda upright while Talbot lighted another cigaret, she said as if she had been thinking it over for some time—

"I don't think you and I would make much of a go of marriage, Dick."

"Now, don't let's——"

"I mean it. If I'm too positive, you're not positive enough. And that, to me at least, would be awful!"

"Um—yes—I suppose it would."

"Exactly. You merely *suppose* it would. I *know*."

Ruth stared reflectively into the dark toward the little vegetable garden and after a while she said deliberately:

"Other women and some men supposed English garden vegetables would grow here. I knew they would. And they did. So don't let's *suppose* any more about us either, Dick. Let's *know*. Shall we?"

Talbot did not say anything. There was a certain cold-blooded incisiveness about Ruth's manner of getting rid of disturbing things that both fascinated and chilled him. She operated on life with an ax and a butcher's cleaver and afterward seemed to expect the broken pieces she strewed in her wake to grow tongues and thank her. But one had to know her fairly intimately to find this out.

"Shall we?" she persisted, and evidently wanted the thing settled.

Talbot's sleepy eyes twinkled faintly.

"Why—I don't mind."

And then there came a long, long quiet which nothing seemed to want to interrupt. Even the faint tinkle of a mandolin in the hands of a colored clerk on the other side of the beach, stopped tinkling, and while Talbot inhaled cigaret smoke lazily, Ruth looked through the smoke into the heart of her vegetable garden.

Then, quietly but precisely—

"Good night, Captain Talbot."

"Oh—er—good night."

Talbot straightened a little, saw no sign of an outstretched hand, and slouched off the veranda and down toward the main path and Kenley's office with long and habitually careless strides.

Ruth continued to lean idly against the veranda upright; and there was nothing in the indifferent lift of her head or the nonchalant droop of her left shoulder to suggest tensity or even interest of any kind.

But in the shadow of the veranda rail, one small hand was clutching tighter and tighter, and tighter, while a flame in her eyes kept leaping and falling, leaping and falling, with every deep and silent breath she drew.

There were no words. Not a sound.

Even though, in one sharp and knife-like second, she had discovered, without a doubt, that there was such a thing as being too positive.

CHAPTER XXIII

WITHOUT ANY OBLIGATION

SITTING almost directly under the stand lamp in Kenley's office, Calvert awaited Captain Talbot's arrival with more patience than Kenley did.

Apparently Calvert did not care particularly how long he waited if he did not have to do any talking in the interval. His principal concern of the moment seemed to be to catch snatches of sleep whenever Kenley's impatience would let him; and though he had given every appearance of being perfectly sober and agreeable in Bella Todd's company, he now gave a decided impression of having awakened in a "morning after" humor that did not want to enter into any conversation upon anything.

Even after Captain Talbot came in with a drawling, "Sorry I'm late," and slouched to a chair on the far side of Kenley's desk, Calvert acknowledged his arrival merely with a grunt and allowed his chin to sink upon his chest again, evidently prepared to keep it there until such time as Kenley would say something that would make it worth his while to lift it.

Kenley did not sit down. Although he accepted one of Talbot's cigarets, murmuring at the same time, "What the deuce kept you?" he did not bother to wait to hear if Talbot would answer, but stepped nervously back to his own side of the desk again.

Having reached his chair, he stood with both hands resting on the back of it, a cigaret drooping from his lips—which gave him a most unnatural appearance—and looked at Calvert as if he were trying to decide just how much he ought to say to encourage Calvert to become talkative on his own account.

"Feeling all right?" he asked for perhaps the sixth time since Calvert had come in.

"Loggy a bit, that's all," the trader mumbled, but did not lift his chin. "Be all right in a little while."

"Perhaps you'd like to postpone our talk until the morning?"

"That's all right," thickly. "Nothing the matter with me. Head's as clear—what are we going to talk about?"

Kenley looked dubious and removed the cigaret from his mouth because the smoke was going into his eyes. He did not think Calvert would be of much use to them that evening.

"That's more for you to say than for me," he declared presently. "We'd like to prove to begin with that this fellow Biko is Akka-Chuku, and if he is we'd naturally like to catch him."

"Hunh. You had him once."

"Yes," quietly and patiently enough. "That's why you're here."

Calvert's chin lifted about an inch.

"What does that mean?"

"We'd like to know how you got hold of him," Kenley explained simply. "Also why you are so sure he is the man we are after, and whether you can get him again, or perhaps suggest how we might go about it ourselves. No use combing the bush for him. We know that."

Calvert grunted and glanced glumly past the D. C. at the shadowlike figure of a Yoruba passing the door immediately in front of him. There were several doors, all of them open as usual, and the Yoruba occasionally showed before each of them. This was simply a "war measure," more for moral effect than for safety and had nothing to do with the fact that Calvert was present in the D. C.'s office. Calvert knew this, but he chose to resent it and ignored Kenley's questions altogether.

"What's that fellow doing out there?" he demanded disagreeably. "You ask me to come down here and talk to you, and then throw a ring of sentries around the place. What am I? A guest or a gun-runner?"

Talbot smiled slightly, but Kenley said a little impatiently:

"Don't get ratty, Calvert. No need for it. You know perfectly well that sentry isn't there on your account."

"No? Hunh. All right."

A rather long and mumbling pause that seemed to be devoted to deciding whether it was all right or not.

"No harm done, eh? No harm done. All right."

He laughed shortly and his glance roved leisurely across the desk in Talbot's direction; and having fixed the captain with an interrogative stare, he said confidingly, as one gentleman to another:

"I pulled that punch, Captain, as a gentleman always does. But the fool dropped—dropped, —— it, before I could hit him again! Called me a swine, too. A swine. And that's always good for at least two wallops; at least two. You'll admit that, Captain? Two wallops for the word swine? Am I right or—" twisting sharply around toward Kenley with a solemn air of judicial inquiry—"or am I *wrong?*"

"Oh, confound you!" Kenley exclaimed, while Talbot's smile had become almost a grin. "You're only half awake and at least three-quarters drunk." He glanced toward Talbot hopelessly. "Wonder where the —— he got it? He seemed perfectly all right an hour ago."

Talbot nodded.

"Better put him to bed, hadn't we? No chance of getting anything out of him tonight."

"Not much."

"All right," Talbot drawled and rose. "You lock up and toddle home. I can take care of him all right."

Kenley took another look at Calvert,

whose chin had fallen forward on his chest again, and whose breathing suggested that he would be asleep in no time if they did not get him out of there.

So the D. C. nodded finally and briefly and said to Talbot:

"Thanks, old man. Wish you would. But you'll be over later?"

Talbot at once gave his attention to Calvert.

"Er—no. Bit late I think. And none of us got an awful lot of sleep last night."

Kenley did not fail to note that Talbot did not look at him when he said this. And because Talbot had been so late in arriving, it was not very hard for Kenley to suspect the reason.

However Calvert, who had a peculiarly personal interest in the captain's love affair, did not merely suspect a rift in this particular lute. Out of the corner of one sleepily narrowed eye he saw it quite plainly. So he at once did what he could to relieve Talbot from the immediate embarrassment of further explanation.

"Where's MacConnachie?" he demanded, rousing himself suddenly and antagonistically. "Fetch MacConnachie. I want to see him."

"He's over at the annex," Talbot said quietly and took hold of Calvert's arm. "I'll take you over there."

Calvert studied him blearily, then grinned.

"Thanks. You're—gentleman. And you know—two wallops for the word swine. Two. And I had only one."

WITH Talbot's hand on his arm, he lurched heavily out of Kenley's office, and the captain had no trouble taking him over to the annex. But by the time they had reached the room that had been assigned to him, Calvert appeared to have forgotten MacConnachie and the wallop he owed him.

His obsession by that time was to get his head down on a pillow, without bothering to undress, and keep it there. A few minutes later, according to the sounds he made, he was fast asleep.

Nevertheless, he heard Talbot's step go along the hall and down the stairs, and in a little while he was sitting on the edge of the mosquito-curtained bed, putting on the shoes Talbot had been considerate enough to take off. He regretted the necessity that compelled him to put on the shoes again, but thought he would look just a little too suspicious without them.

Then, from a window overlooking the beach, he saw that the light in Kenley's office had gone out. Down by the waterfront were two bobbing lights in the hands of watch-boys or native police, and occasionally the shadow of a white man crossed these lights or stood beside them for a moment and then passed on.

After a while Calvert strolled out of his room, down the stairs, and ambled leisurely toward the waterfront.

One or two Hausa took rather more than a second look at him, but, muttering to themselves, allowed him to pass without question; and he reached the tail end of the main wharf, where the canoes and gigs and one surf boat were tied up, before he encountered a white man.

"'Lo, Geddes. Don't get much sleep these days, do you?"

Geddes, of the transport department, peered at him a moment, then said in a friendly enough voice:

"Hello, Calvert. Thought you were asleep?"

"I was. Several times. But can't stick it out very long. How are things shaping now? Quieting down? I see you've put the machine-gun back to bed?"

Geddes glanced out to the wharf-end, where the machine-gun no longer spoke its silent warning to the river.

"Yes. No need to work a moral effect too long, you know?" he laughed. "Those fellows hate that gun."

Calvert grinned.

"Don't blame 'em. It's bad medicine on mob formation."

A pause.

"Think I'll stroll out to the end of the wharf and watch the water go by. It has a slinking oily blackness these nights that reminds me of a sleepy blackwater snake that is going to come to life —— suddenly and swallow me."

Geddes, who was naturally and by profession a superstitious man, looked at Calvert quickly and shivered.

"Oh, shut up. You give a man the creeps."

"Want to come along and see that I don't fall in?"

"Not I. But go ahead and look."

"Thanks," as if he appreciated the favor

Geddes was conferring upon him, and without further ado walked leisurely out to the end of the wharf where a government launch was tied up.

Geddes watched him for a minute or two, then shook his head hopelessly and walked off in search of MacConnachie who was idling his time playing a dull game of poker with the assistant district commissioner, in the latter's room above the post-office.

"Calvert's down on the wharf, Mac, if you want to see him," Geddes announced matter-of-factly. "Kenley's gone home and Talbot's gone back to the barracks. I won't interfere if you won't make too much of a fuss about it."

"Then I'd better slope," the A. D. C. said and rose. "Because I'd have to interfere. But I'll try to see it somehow. How much do I owe you now, Mac? Fifty-two? I hope he breaks your neck."

"On the wharf, eh?"

MacConnachie came to his feet with an assumption of bravado he was far from feeling. But he knew in view of the many things he had threatened to do to Calvert, that he had to make a bluff of some sort.

So he went down to the wharf, with Geddes trailing several careful yards behind him. But at the tail end of the wharf, MacConnachie stopped and turned his head.

"Where is he? I don't see him."

Neither did Geddes.

"Good heavens!" the latter exclaimed. "I hope the foolhasn't fallen in!"

"He'd break his neck on the deck of the launch if he did," MacConnachie offered sourly as they quickened their pace until they reached the end of the wharf.

But Calvert, apparently, had not fallen into the launch. Nor had he, according to the Hausa sentries they hurriedly questioned, gone back to the annex; nor anywhere else within the limits of the government beach as far as they were able to discover.

There were no gigs or canoes missing; not even Lali's, which, having been trailed down river in the launch's wake, was the latest addition to the cluster of small craft huddling the tail end of the wharf.

So that Geddes looked badly worried as he made his way up to the Kenley bungalow to report the matter in person. And he was not thinking of what Kenley would have to say, so much as he was remembering what Calvert had said about the slinking oily blackness that, like a sleepy blackwater snake, was going to wake up suddenly and swallow him.

Not much use in scouring the river with the launch in a case of that kind.

A HALF-MILE swim against the current with his shoes around his neck, a frightened watch-boy on the A. P. A. beach who was not accustomed to seeing white men rising suddenly and mysteriously out of the waters of Allobar Creek, and the better part of a four-mile walk through the bush; these three obstacles had lain between Calvert and his objective.

But as he was seated on his own veranda again by one A.M., he considered he had not done so badly.

More than this, he was under no obligation to any one. Not even to the A. P. A. watch-boy who had accepted a two-piece dash—four shillings—in exchange for permission to cross the beach and for a promise to keep a still tongue in his head.

What Kenley would think, Calvert did not know or care. He was back where he belonged and, this time, intended to remain there. And whether the A. P. A. watch-boy actually did remain silent or not, did not matter. It was too late for any one, either helpfully or antagonistically, to interfere with Calvert's design now.

Curiously enough, even after such strenuous exertion in pursuit of freedom, he gave no thought to the brandy bottle. In fact, from start to finish, since he had stood beside the waterfront listening to John Todd's gig slipping with measured strokes into the blackness of midstream, there had been just one thought in Calvert's head.

There was just one thought now. And when, after a while, he made a pretence of going to bed, it was this one thought that kept him awake, and at the same time kept him sober.

This thought was simply, but most expressively—

"Out!"

It was always italicized. Sometimes it sounded inside his head like an incredulous shriek; or dully, as if, like any very small school boy, he were trying desperately hard to make sense out of such a stupid appearing combination of letters as o—u—t; or there was an indignant question mark after the word; or it tolled steadily for minutes at a time like a pronouncement of doom.

But, however it sounded, it was always italicized.

Out!

Sometimes Calvert grinned at it, as men of another day and age actually did grin when their living hearts were torn from their bodies; sometimes he sneered and sometimes he raged, and now and then he looked at the word quietly and sanely and tried to face it as one might resolutely try to face oneself in a mirror after a disfiguring accident. But most of the time his battered body and nerves shivered and tried to push the thing away or to drown out the sound of it.

But still he did not resort to the brandy bottle. If he thought about it at all, it was with a rather vague and absurd understanding that there could be no real kinship between them after this. Always, in the future, when his hand would go out to it, he felt it would go out sullenly and grudgingly, acknowledging a friendship he knew no longer existed.

Not that he blamed the brandy bottle. It had simply been attending to business. He hadn't. But in the future——

Out! Out! This was his future. *Out.* Into what? Nothing. They might as well shoot him.

The gray-black tangle of creeks slipping silently and sluggishly between dull green mangrove walls, and the fever-laden mists that lifted lazily from the swamps in the starkly naked heat of the day; the sudden rushing, swirling breath of the tornado and the solid leaden sheets of rain that flooded the gutters and tore great furrows in the man-made *chic-coco* beaches to show him where his handiwork was weak; the chill of the Harmatan that came down in the small hours of the morning from the Sahara and caught the unwary asleep.

The baking glare of high noon that stripped life to the skin and strewed the shadows with motionless, log-like things that had the shapes of men; the lazy drone of the evening that quieted off into the silence of night, when a man's thoughts lifted to reeling, drunken heights without any assistance from alcohol, or sank to the level of the brooding brute beasts that stamped sullenly in the dark beyond the slimy green scum of the little side creek; this—the good and the bad of it—had seeped into Calvert's bones until it had become as much a part of him as his hands and feet.

And Kenley—Ruth Kenley, too—thought it would be all right and perfectly proper to throw him *out.*

Just like a —— Hamburg wharf-rat inadvertently left behind by an iron-decked gin-tank!

Thus Norman Daniel Calvert, artist, palm oil ruffian and gentleman, who had drifted down to the bath-towel stage with a laugh on his lips, listened intently to the sound of the little word *out.*

And paused a while.

CHAPTER XXIV

BUSH AND WATER

IT WAS two mornings later that John Todd looked out upon the river at his customary hour of five-thirty, and almost forgot that Bella was not speaking to him.

Scattered hither and yon upon the face of Allobar Creek were trade canoes of every description laden with palm oil and kernels and rubber, all of them heading as fast as paddles could take them for the breakwaters of the several trading beaches along the right bank of the river.

Clustering John's own breakwater was a thick and swarming string of them that made John's normally songless soul burst into a psalm of praise that did not, however, get past his lips.

Now, surely, there was to be no fighting. Akka-Chuku, apparently glad to get off with a whole skin, had evidently decided to take his murdering, head-chopping antics elsewhere, and allow decent, non-fighting men like John himself to live in peace.

And all up and down the river, honest Ibo traders were explaining the past few days of intense excitement very simply, and as if no other explanation were needed.

"Be *ju-ju* play palaver, dat's all. We no *savez* Obu-madu. We no *savez* Akka-Chuku. Be *ju-ju* play palaver, dat's all."

This was not an unusual explanation. "*Ju-ju* play palavers" did interfere with trade occasionally, sometimes for days and in some parts of the country for weeks at a time.

And though this bland, shoulder-shrugging dismissal of the unlawful, sacrificial ceremony on Allobar Creek did not solve the government's difficulty as far as Akka-Chuku himself was concerned, it did relieve the white trading fraternity of further active responsibility in the matter; and business was just as much business on Allobar Creek as it was in London or New York.

Consequently, all of the refugees, including Ferguson and Calvert's Kroo-boys, were allowed to return to their own beaches. And Calvert, who was quite sober when Ferguson arrived, did not ask him if he had any message to deliver from the D. C. He knew there was no message, because a simple and amazingly unofficial note from Kenley had already said:

> My dear Calvert:
>
> I regret that you found it necessary to play that rather queer and incredible trick upon me last night. Of course, if for some reason or other, you do not wish to be of assistance, I can not make it compulsory. But I think, in the long run, it pays to be helpful. Come down and let's have a chat some time. W. K.

Calvert could not have looked upon a forged check with more suspicion. And he made no reply. Right or wrong, he would have no dealings of any kind with a man who, even for a minute, in good temper or bad, had had it in mind to put him *out*.

Nor with anything belonging or pertaining to that man—business, smoke, drink, conversation, what not; nothing. And when the thought came to him, as it frequently did, that Ruth Kenley had endorsed the most damnable proposal——

There were no words for this. Just a slight shiver that shook all coherent thought into a state of chaos.

Furthermore, Calvert continued in this frame of mind and appeared at dinner five evenings in succession with such a stamp of sobriety upon him that even Ferguson, who was naturally skeptical, was beginning to believe it.

In fact, it was doubtful, on Allobar Creek, whether the passing threat of war, or the rumor that Calvert had suddenly and mysteriously reformed, was the greater piece of news.

Calvert, however, knew he had not reformed, just as he knew that the threat of bloodshed had not passed. And though in these days of great relief, sober men were inclined to drink foolishly, and Bella Todd was on the verge of speaking to John once or twice, Calvert drank little or nothing, had no desire to speak to any one except Lali, and did most of his sleeping in the day time.

This last was necessary because he spent the greater part of his nights watching the river and the bush, with a revolver in his belt and a rifle always within easy reach of his hand.

He did all this the more thoroughly when he learned that Kenley had apparently decided to allow Chief Otobo and his son Oku to appear in public without fear of arrest, and that Zatza the Pure was being held only on the technical charge of having threatened the D. C. with felonious assault.

Lali, as Calvert took some trouble to hear, was to be set free as soon as she felt fit enough to paddle herself away from the government beach.

All of which, according to the direct evidence against each and all of them, was comparatively fair justice, and much better politics, for the time being, than Calvert had expected.

But he had a shrewd suspicion that Lali would probably leave the hospital several days before Dr. Allen was ready to discharge her, and that she would dispense with government supervision, as he had done, in silence and at night.

As it happened, however, Zatza the Pure left the government beach before Lali did; though just how the departure was brought about no one seemed to be able to say.

She was under lock and key on the evening of one day, and gone the morning of the next; and though several members of the native police were believed to have had a hand in it, and Kenley looked into the matter as rigorously as was his habit, he did this more for the sake of discipline than with any hope of achieving anything like a satisfactory result. Almost the whole sum of his findings was that keys had been stolen, doors and gates had been unlocked, and Zatza had walked out and away.

Secretly, Kenley was rather glad to get rid of her so simply. She was too old to punish with any of the usual chastisements, and allowing her simply to sit around, putting "bad eye *ju-ju*" upon his police force, either one at a time or in a lump, was bad for their morale.

She did not, however, make use of her freedom to visit the hospital. So that Lali was permitted to nurse and heal her wounds in peace; that is, in as much peace as a turbulent soul like Lali's was ever likely to have, particularly after the bandages were removed.

THE evening this happened, Lali cautiously left her comfortable bed, skipped past the sleeping hospital orderly, twisting her overcloth into the tightest of knots under her arm-pits. But she did not go very far; just into the dark of the wide government lawn, in the middle of which she disappeared by the simple process of sinking to the ground and lying flat on her stomach.

Her hands reached out as far as her silky black arms could stretch, and her fingers—even her teeth—clawed and bit at the hard earth, while "Lali, the she-leopard without spots" writhed and inwardly shrieked her passion and her hate to the nethermost reaches of her own particular conception of hell.

She had been flogged with knives. This she knew. And this all men might know. But their tongues must not speak nor their eyes look. For she would cut out the tongue that whispered, and put out the eye that looked; and the hands and the eyes that had flogged her with knives——

The expression on her face was not merely a threat. It was an ecstasy.

For Lali knew, just as Calvert did, that neither he nor she, nor Allobar Creek, was as yet quite done with Onwu-Biko, the last born.

THE thing, like a head, that bobbed in midstream, between the A. P. A. and the government beaches, might have suggested to Calvert, had he seen it, that he had made the swimming of Allobar Creek somewhat popular.

But even if he had been standing on either the A. P. A. or the government wharf, instead of sitting in his office making up his neglected accounts, it is doubtful if he would have seen that head in any case, or been able to tell whether it was one head or several.

The hour was about nine-thirty on the evening of the day after Lali had had the bandages removed. There was no moon; no lights of any kind upon the river.

In the shadow of the bush as usual, trade canoes slipped quietly up and down river; but how far up and how far down, no man bothered to inquire. And that the number of large canoes was greater than the normal trade of Allobar called for, had not occurred to any one; not even to Calvert, who, at his end of the settlement, had sized up the night as being dark enough, but, if anything, rather quieter than any night since the trade of the river had been resumed.

Dr. Allen, who had been dining with Dilby of Marsden & Co. and had to leave early to make a call at Perkins & Gray's, where one of the assistants was down with fever, returned to the government beach in a gig-boat shortly before ten o'clock, and saw or suspected nothing that led him to believe there was anything in the wind.

Passing Marsden's beach on the way home, he thought he saw some Kroo-boys swimming rather far away from the Marsden oil wharf, but he paid no attention to this, and certainly said nothing about it to Geddes or any one else when he reached the government beach.

By this time, the head that had bobbed in midstream, was no longer there. It had almost reached the A. P. A. breakwater, which was cluttered with trade canoes waiting for business to resume in the morning.

Hardly an inch of the breakwater's concrete length was unoccupied; so the head vanished for a while, and the next time it appeared—though no one saw it at first—it seemed to be crawling up one of the A. P. A. oil-wharf piles, which was a kind of greasy-pole trick at best, and not the quickest or the shortest cut by any means.

But it appeared to be least conspicuous and this, apparently, was what the head, and the body that was now attached to it, was after; and when it landed on the wharf, and sprawled there gasping for a second or two, it did not immediately rise to its feet. It slithered soppily along on its stomach until it reached the tail end of the wharf and rounded a clump of cactus and limes that suddenly formed a screen between it and the river.

Then Lali came crouching to her feet, unfastening her overcloth, which she had bound around her waist. And, wrapping its soggy folds about her and tightening it under her armpits as tightly as her numbed fingers would allow, she wound an equally soggy silk handkerchief about her head and stumbled warily across John Todd's lawn toward the door of his bungalow.

A watch-boy with a lantern, passing the gin store, to the right of the law, saw the shadow of her, stopped, and came toward her cautiously. But she did not try to avoid him. Although she seemed to be mortally afraid of his lantern, she had no fear of him, and when he was some distance away from her, she whispered gaspingly:

"I go foh bush—for Paller beach. Tell Mas' Todd—maybe so Mar Todd—I want talk big palaver li'l bit. I wait foh galley side. Make quick!"

The watch-boy naturally hesitated, so that he might have a closer look at the woman who was ordering him around like this; and Lali breathed angrily:

"Bushman! Make quick! You no get sense? Big palaver live. I wait foh galley side."

And without pausing to hear or see what the watch boy thought about it, she stumbled on a little farther until she leaned gratefully against the dark rear wall of the tiny annex that acted as a kitchen for the bungalow. Here, before John's heavy foot and Bella's lighter one were heard approaching, she managed to get some more of her breath back.

Presently, however, John Todd stood before her with Bella at his side. John was very nervous and uncomfortable; though, for that matter, Lali did not look at him, but gave all of her attention to his white wife, who had laid a quieting hand upon her shoulder and was peering into her face in no little amazement.

"What's wrong wi' ye? Your claes—they're a' wet. Dod, lassie——"

"Big palaver live! Akka-Chuku go craze. All black man foh dis creek go craze. Dey go kill all man. Be so I swim creek. No canoe fit to go foh river!"

Then as John's glance, and Bella's, too, looked naturally and skeptically toward the waterfront where there were canoes enough to give Lali's story the lie direct, the girl's voice lifted indignantly:

"I swim creek! I no talk lie! I swim creek! Be big water *ju-ju!* Akka-Chuku go kill all men! I no lie! All sam you be my frien'—" she was careful in spite of her excitement to say this to Bella and not to John—"I swim creek, so Akka-Chuku no fit to kill you. Go foh bush! He no *savez* bush *ju-ju*. Be water *ju-ju* he *savez* propah. All same you go foh bush, be all ri'."

Apparently this was simple and understandable enough to Lali, who saw no reason why John Todd or his white wife or anybody else should doubt the fact that Akka-Chuku's gods were gods of the water and the waterfront, and that they, as a consequence, became impotent in the bush. Therefore, if one scurried into the bush as fast as possible, everything would be all right.

John understood Lali's point of view. And he knew that the defense of property and resentment against being chased out of one's own front yard, did not form a part of it. So he asked quietly and kindly enough, considering who she was—

"You talk this palaver foh gov'ment man?"

Lali shook her head hopelessly.

"Gov'ment man say I talk lie all time. Gov'ment say, 'How you *savez* dis thing? Which place you catch this so-so lie?' So I no fit to talk foh gov'ment. I go talk foh Mas' Calvert. He *savez* Lali. He *savez* I no talk lie foh dis thing."

Then, as John and Bella looked expressively at one another without uttering a word, Lali said briefly and just a little disgustedly:

"I go foh Paller beach one time. I no fit to talk so-so small-boy talk foh dis place."

But John reached out a large and awful hand and gripped her arm.

"Wait."

Lali waited. But she did not look at him; only at Bella, who had taken hold of her other hand, and was stroking it to quiet her.

"Gov'ment no *savez* this palaver?" John asked again.

"Gov'ment no *savez*," sullenly.

"All right. Go foh Paller beach. Tell Mas' Calvert come foh dis beach with all man foh him beach. *Savez?*"

"I *savez*," Lali said, but had no intention of doing anything of the sort; not if she could convince Calvert to take to the bush as every sensible man should do.

"All right," John assured her. "I send Kroo-boy for Marsden's and Perkins' and Oil Rivers Company beaches. You no trouble foh dat. Go Paller beach one time."

"But, John, the lassie's claes——"

Bella stopped there, not simply because of the ghastly realization that she had spoken to John, but also because there was no Lali there to talk about.

The girl had slipped around the corner of the galley and was speeding bushward with a keen and staring-eyed appreciation of the value of time.

CHAPTER XXV

PICTURES

CALVERT, who was an artist with a kind of Doré imagination, would have put upon canvas a picture of Allobar Creek, rising bodily out of a skulking dark, into the meager light of a watch boy's lantern, and spewing a writhing, shrieking slime over the top of a long mangrove stick breakwater.

This would not, of course, have been strictly true. As a matter of cold, sober fact it would not have been true at all, because Allobar Creek did not rise an inch. But no one who had had an opportunity to see even what Calvert saw, would have been inclined to criticize his picture on the ground of being impossible or unreal.

No one saw the whole canvas; just patches of it; ragged, torn-off bits, most of them simply black and bloody with a spit of flame streaking through it.

There was a rising out of the waters of Allobar Creek of apparently countless near-naked black bodies that seemed to heave in a solid mass across the concrete and mangrove stick breakwaters. Then this mass spread itself out more thinly until it actually resolved itself into more or less clearly defined entities that finally became men.

Doubtless the dark was responsible for this illusion; for, even in the Niger Delta, where strange and seemingly impossible things do happen, men do not rise out of water in one body, and become several hundred or thousand bodies when their feet touch the earth.

But that they came from the black water, and that they came with a silence and suddenness that was appalling, no one had the slightest doubt whatever, not even John Todd, who had had a little time to prepare.

Also their numbers did not matter very much. Whether the odds were a hundred or five hundred to one did not interest the majority of the "ones", who did not have a chance to count even up to fifty.

Thus Lali's race against time stopped abruptly as she tore along the bush path just beyond Perkins & Gray's. After that, though she continued to go on, she knew she had no news to carry to Calvert.

It was already there.

For all his wariness, and in spite of the fact that all along the river front his was the first shot fired, Calvert never had a chance.

He had become tired of his accounts and had gone out to the veranda. Then, after peering at the river for a while, he had tucked his rifle under his arm and gone down to the oil wharf.

There, he was enabled to take a closer look at the water where he discerned several bobbing heads that suddenly disappeared, only to have others bob up elsewhere.

It was impossible to tell how many heads there were or how far up or down river other heads just like those might be bobbing around in the midstream swell. But that they came from the canoes that were idling along in the shadow of the bush and that there were altogether too many of them for comfort, Calvert did not doubt for a moment.

So, for safety's sake, and in case no one else had chanced to see what he did, he fired two shots into the air in rapid succession, then stared hard into the water to see what the heads would think about it.

As luck would have it, it was these two shots that gave MacConnachie, of all men, a good sprinting chance for his life.

For in less than ten seconds, although the heads paid no attention to the shots, Calvert's experimental gunfire was answered raggedly and from sheer necessity on the A. P. A. beach.

And in less than ten minutes, though Calvert was not aware of most of this, there was almost no more Perkins & Gray's; Marsden's men were fighting hopeless little isolated battles in three or four parts of the beach at once; the Oil Rivers Company, or what was left of it, was trying to gather itself together for a last stand in the dark little alley leading up to the Kroo-house.

John Todd, who had had time to prepare and to dispose his assistants and Kroo-boys at vantage points all over the beach, was executing a previously instructed retreat to the oil yard much faster than he had ever expected to do, and was doing it with scarcely half of his little, hastily organized force intact.

Across the river, on the government beach, naked feet and sprawling, bleeding bodies, were obliterating all trace of Ruth Kenley's vegetable garden.

FERGUSON was gone. The Krooboys and the Accra cook and cooper were gone, too. Calvert knew this much. He did not know that they were all dead, but unless some of them had been lucky enough to escape to the bush, he hoped none of them were alive, as he was.

Like himself, Ferguson had never had a chance. They had lifted themselves—those slimy looking, oil smeared devils, with their chalked-up faces—out of the river all along the breakwater, and were all over the place almost before he had had a chance to leave the wharf.

They had come up from under his very feet—up the wharf piles some of them must have come—while he was still peering at the heads out in midstream!

Fear? There had been a second or two when Calvert had almost dropped his rifle from fright and taken to his heels; just as MacConnachie had had sense enough to do down-river.

In fact, Calvert probably would have sprinted for it, if there had been anywhere to sprint, but, by the time he had turned his head, there were rather more of the enemy curling around behind him than there was in front.

So, of course, he fought.

That was funny. Fought. Hunh. A few pop-bottle reports from a revolver; a few skulls cracked with a gun butt, and then they had ducked under the swing at his legs, several dozen of them at each leg, as it seemed to him. It was after that he *knew*.

They clutched at his arms, leaped for his shoulders and pulled him down by sheer force of numbers. But, except for a bruised eye into which an inadvertent thumb had found its way, bleeding lips and other sundry bruises that were the normal result of a mere rough-and-tumble fight, there was no mark of knife or machete upon his body.

Nothing that had a cutting edge had touched him, and now he knew that nothing of the sort would touch him until he at last stood face to face with Onwu-Biko, the last born, who upon this most official occasion would be known as Akka-Chuku, the Hand of God.

Then Calvert looked downward, as much as he was able, and a slow and slightly sardonic grin spread itself over his face.

The trousers he had on were white; or they had been before these oil-smeared fanatics had taken hold of them, and then piled on top of him so as to keep him long enough in one place to get his hands and feet tied up.

And Calvert was now remembering the first time he had ever worn those trousers; why he had worn them, what they had cost and led to and all about them. He had had them washed since then. But it looked as if they were going to need another washing.

Bound hand and foot to one of the ironwood posts that upheld the galvanized awning of his kernel store, with enough guards about him to flatter the vanity of any man, his chances of escape were very slim.

And not three yards from the toes of his boots, a faded blue-print cloth bundle sat huddled against another ironwood post, blinking little button eyes at him and occasionally making visible the line that passed for a mouth by cursing him most vilely in Ibo.

Zatza the Pure had not done any swimming. Neither, like the others, had she marked her shrunken little face with multicolored chalk and crude native dyes. She was just Zatza, and she was sitting there, in a front seat, waiting to see the fun. He knew she would enjoy it, whatever it was.

The other faces round about him were, he thought, rather clownish; clumsy imitations of what Akka-Chuku would probably look like when he appeared. And it seemed to Calvert that some of them, as he caught a closer glimpse of their faces when the light of the hurricane lamps flared a bit brighter, were already beginning to think that though this kind of thing was all right in the dark of the night, and provided just the kind of excitement a blood-starved man wanted once in a while—what about the morning?

Calvert could have told them.

There would be guns of many sizes, from Onitsha and Warri and even Lagos and Zungeru; not next morning, perhaps, but some morning not far distant, and Allobar would learn all over again that getting drunk on blood did not pay, any more than getting drunk on brandy. And you settled sooner.

Of course, Calvert realized that this would not do him or poor Ferguson, or John Todd and Bella and the rest a great deal of good, and certainly he could not get any satisfaction out of thinking of the few thick and foolish skulls he had cracked.

His only satisfaction just then came from the continued sound of distant firing. As long as that went on, there was life down river, and Calvert did not want to think—well, he did not want to think at all. When he did, he saw too many pictures.

THERE were pictures enough; particularly in the first fifteen to thirty minutes. Some of them were just snapshots; some splashed daubs of realism that came stalking out of the dark without a thought for the effect they might be creating.

In the branches of a mango tree, beyond the little hospital on the government beach, was a comparatively young white man who owed more money than he ever hoped to be able to pay.

He had swung himself into the tree principally because it was the handiest refuge he had been able to find in the first few minutes. And now, as he calmly and with punctilious care picked out targets from a mass of slithering, screaming blacks no great distance from the foot of the tree, he appeared to be taking an almost academic interest in what he was doing and, for the first time in months and months—several years perhaps—was really enjoying life. Just then he did not have a debt in the world.

Upon the other side of the beach, on the concrete path just above the barracks, a white woman was dragging a man along the path by the scruff of the neck. Her Titian-streaked hair straggled over her shoulders, and her linen dress was torn in several places and spattered with thick looking blotches that stared out at one even in the dark. Her eyes were wide open, but they were almost as lifeless as those of the man she persisted in dragging along the path to a place of safety.

She looked like Ruth Kenley and the man was undoubtedly her brother, but it was a different Ruth from the woman who operated on life with an ax and a butcher's cleaver.

For something less than fifteen minutes of time she had looked upon the edge of the equivalent to the ax and cleaver, not in the abstract, but in raw and bloody reality. And she had seen the resulting broken pieces strewn all about her as her little vegetable garden had become a place, not of green and growing things, but of death heaping high on death.

Dimly she had understood that there were several white men, a few colored clerks, a loyal native policeman or two and an increasing number of Hausa and Yoruba soldiers between her and the garden; and then she had begun dragging Walter up the concrete path toward the back of the beach, because this kind of work was the only kind she was fit for under the circumstances.

She could not lift him, there was no one to help, and he was, as she thought, too badly hurt to help himself. So she dragged the dead thing that had been Allobar's district commissioner to a place of temporary safety; foot by foot, desperately and terribly, straining every nerve and sinew until, just a few yards from the thatched huts that housed the government's colored clerks, a Sierra Leonese woman came timidly, but bravely enough, out to help her.

"Awful, isn't it?" Ruth said to the woman with a naturalness that was not the least terrible part of her performance, principally because it was wholly mechanical; a drawl that was as empty of conscious reality as her eyes. "I'll go back and see if I can help some of the others. Do what you can for Mr. Kenley, will you, please?"

And she turned and began to run back the way she had come because, of course, this was the proper thing to do.

About the middle of the cricket field, almost on a line with the barracks gate, there presently stood a machine-gun. And behind the gun was a face, a broad, brown face, with slightly thick lips, high cheekbones and a broad, flat nose. There was no expression whatever upon this face. The rather small brown eyes watched the spits of flame that came from the muzzle of the gun and apparently paid no heed to results.

After a little while, a slouching figure came out of the murk issued a quiet but sharp order to the Yoruba machine gunner, then slouched away again.

The Yoruba heard the order plainly enough, and with his gun crew, obeyed it. But his face showed a sign of perturbation now, and continued to show it, until a new line some distance farther back had been established, and the spits of flame were steadily flowing forth again.

Then he was happy; a kind of trancelike happiness that lost all track of the screeching, thundering world about him, just so long as the muzzle of the gun belched destruction in little spits of flame.

Talbot was not material for a picture; for nothing, at least, that was any more unusual to him than a bruised thumb is to a carpenter, or a squawling youngster to a minister at a christening. Talbot was at work. He was handling his job after his own fashion, slouching his apparently careless way through it, knowing that this was not war, as war is generally understood, but madness; and, working perhaps a shade harder than he had ever done in a given space of time, he was concentrating everything on the task of bringing that first wild, all-destroying rush to a halt.

If he could do this, he felt that, with care, he could plod through till the morning when daylight would have its own effect upon Allobar's fit of temporary insanity.

But, though his picture, drawn from a photograph, perhaps, by several staff artists, would probably be in the newspapers if he succeeded as he hoped, he was not material for a picture as, for instance, Chief Otobo was.

It would have made Talbot feel much more comfortable if he had been able to see Chief Otobo, particularly since Talbot knew that Kenley and Dr. Allen, at least one P. W. D. man, and an A. D. C. who had been on his way to Onitsha, were gone.

For Otobo, also, was dead. He had been a rather small, sharp featured, but blandly engaging man, and he was sitting propped up against a tree near the annex, his head slightly bent forward as if he were thinking rather harder than usual. He had been sitting there, quietly enjoying Akka-Chuku's entertaining pursuit of blood, while he recovered his breath which had been lost in the strenuous excitement of the first leap over the breakwater.

Then a stray Hausa bullet chugged a hole in the conservative dark red and blue blazer he wore; just over the pocket. His head had snapped up a little; then down a little. And that was all.

But Allobar would know better in the morning.

Behind Talbot's slightly less ragged lines, MacConnachie limped about on one foot, and did what he could with the only arm that was now of any use to him. There was blood all over him; his own and other people's, and he was very sick. But he was still on his feet—or rather on one of them—and he was just spiteful enough to want to stay on that one foot until he had had a shot at Biko or Akka-Chuku or whatever his —— name was.

MacConnachie, as it chanced, had been the only white man in the living quarters above the executive offices when the first black wave broke over the concrete breakwater. Two far-off shots up-river had brought other heads up as well as his, but he was nearest to the river, and when he went to a window overlooking the creek, the thing he saw then made him grab a revolver and bolt.

He had a thirty-yard lead on the nearest of Akka-Chuku's devotees when he reached the beach, and though he yelled a warning as loudly as he could, the revolver shots he flung into the mob behind him, did infinitely more good all around.

After that had come the fight in the vegetable garden. Allen, Kenley, one of his own men, the A. D. C. bound for Onitsha —All things considered, MacConnachie thought he had come out of the mess not so badly. And so he hopped around on one leg a little longer, emptying his revolver at regular intervals and looking impatiently the while for the sub-house-boy who was responsible for it all.

ACROSS the river, the pictures had been somewhat different, particularly on Perkins & Gray's beach. There, they had all been snapshots, with no time at all for any kind of pose.

Only the man who had been down with fever had escaped, and he got away because, with a temperature of something over one hundred and four, he had not been thinking at all coherently. So he leaped from his bed and bolted for the bush, with a queer idea in his befuddled head that there were a lot of devils with chalk on their faces chasing him all over the place.

On Marsden's beach, which fared but little better, a very young and conceited junior assistant, not more than twenty, sat astride the roof of the gin store trying to find a corner of his mouth that would hold a cigaret without getting it all red and wet. He had just one consuming ambition; to die like a hero with a cigaret in his mouth. And he managed it all right; about half a minute before the pot-leg in his lung put the cigaret out.

And next door, on the A. P. A. beach, there was the uncanny and incredible picture of John Todd, who was not a fighting man, actually helping some of the oil-smeared madmen through the barbed-wire fence that surrounded most of the oil yard, so that he could get a better whack at them on the inside.

John was not much of a hand with a gun. He liked a good, round thick stick better, and when you were fighting people who did most of their killing with machetes or knives, it seemed that a club, if it were heavy enough, was the fairer weapon.

Once John did not use even the club. Nothing but his huge hands, with his knee sticking into the nape of the man's neck. And when the greasy body rolled off John's knee, he hardly gave it a second look; just stooped to pick up his fallen club and then went in search of some one else who was maybe a wee bit too anxious to get through his barbed-wire fence into his oil yard.

Of course, John was not angry; just indignant. And he was not fighting. He was just defending himself.

But Bella had seen this awful thing and heard it, too. From the shelter of a hogshead of tobacco, with a Winchester repeater cuddling her shoulder and cheek, she followed John with her eyes in a kind of shuddering awe; the only shudder she had been guilty of till that moment.

Bella was not expressing her surcharged emotions by doing any of the things Talbot had expected a girl with a face like hers to do. She was not singing; at least, not yet. And, of course, being John Todd's wife, she was not smoking or swearing, no matter how much she might have felt disposed toward the latter.

Something like Captain Talbot himself, Bella was not particularly good picture material. She looked too natural. And the calm upon her slightly flushed and almost too pretty face, made Gibbs, the senior assistant, stop shooting oftener than he should have done, simply to gape at her.

Although her hands and the sleeves of her dress were black enough, she was otherwise, in such an occasion, painfully clean. Even her hair had suffered but little disorder. Yet no member of John Todd's desperate little company had made the retreat to the oil yard in more finished, soldierly fashion, nor did more damage to the enemy in the process.

But there was a good and sufficient reason for all of this.

First, it was without a doubt, a "mad-bull" emergency. Never would she need a quieter mind or a steadier hand. And from the instant Lali had so startlingly arrived on the beach, and more particularly after Bella had got the feel of the Winchester in her hands, she had been saying over and over and over:

"Mad bull. Mad bull. Ye'll need to be quiet, Bella Imrie. Aye, ye will that. Quiet. Quiet. Quiet."

And there was no doubt that the Winchester—practically the first gun she had learned to shoot with—cuddling into her shoulder, helped a lot. For, though John might not be much of a hand with guns, Bella had been toppling blacks with a great deal more ease than she had pulled down grouse over the buttes just a few miles north of Abertinny. She had found that a man, no matter how much he danced and skeleched around, was a lot easier to hit than a wee bit of a bird whirling through space like a kind of fat, short-tailed rocket.

And those oily, chalked-up things she was now shooting at were not human beings. They were mad bulls occupying, for the time being, the bodies of men. Also, Bella had not come by her fighting instinct or her ability to shoot by any process that was in the least extraordinary.

She had told Ruth Kenley that her father was a farmer. And this was true enough. But the folks round about Abertinny would have laughed if they had heard of Andrew Imrie being referred to simply as a farmer; just like one of themselves. For Andrew Imrie and Abertinny were practically the same thing, and what he did not own in that quarter, the rest of the Imries did. So that Bella came not only of solidly entrenched stock, but it was further well understood in Abertinny and elsewhere that she came also of fighting stock; that first.

There was thought to be something wrong with an Imrie of Abertinny who had not been, for some part of his life, at least, in some kind of army, somewhere. Always the army. Some of them had been officers, some just privates and non-coms, some no better than scalawags without a uniform of any kind, hugging a gun butt into their shoulders and fighting for whatever cause happened to bob up wherever they happened to be.

This was the family John Jock Todd, a non-fighting man, had gotten himself married into!

And sometimes, when John chanced to get a good look at Bella, cuddling that Winchester against her cheek, and watched her pull the trigger, and saw how quiet she looked when she did it, he was willing to admit that a lassie like that was a great help to a man in a tapsalteerie situation like this, but he hoped vaguely that excitements of the kind were not exactly a necessity to her.

But Bella, minute by minute, was only too keenly aware that her quietness was mostly on the outside, and she did not know how long she would be able to keep the mask from falling off.

And as she listened—and she did listen—to the awful, deepening hush up river, and to the doubtful rise and fall of the gunfire on the government beach, she knew something inside her head, in spite of her "mad-bull" ritual, was going to go off with a loud noise sooner or later.

IN THE beginning, as far as she was concerned, there had been no time for thinking, and consequently no time for "nerves." But, after a while, cooped up in the oil yard, among shooks and casks and piles of lumber, crouching behind a hogshead of tobacco by the hour, picking painted "mad-bulls" off the barbed-wire fence and from the roof of the general warehouse which formed one side of the yard; thinking more and more of the silence up river, and hearing Talbot's guns become so quiet sometimes that she wondered, with her heart in her mouth, if they would ever speak again; then hearing them lift and lift until once more they drowned out the fearsome groans and screams that otherwise filled her ears; this kind of thing, repeated over and over again, hour by hour all through the night, made the quiet look upon Bella's face take on a thinner appearance, just as if it would shortly wear through altogether.

And toward the morning, when the screeching blacks outside the fence had become fewer and fewer, obviously drawn off as reenforcements in the fight on the government beach; when Talbot's guns began to speak louder and louder and nearer and nearer almost every minute, Bella gave the first outward sign of the explosion that was bound to come.

She had been shaking her head back restlessly, as if the weight of her hair had become bothersome in the sticky heat of the night. Now, a slightly nervous hand went up and removed a few hairpins—then shook the whole mass out till it billowed over her shoulders and hung to her waist.

She knew John was up at the other end of the yard, and for a little while this helped, but presently she began to hum something—she was not thinking what—and she began doing it with such a subdued voice that it was almost under her breath.

But, almost as if she were lifting the pitch according to the ever lifting accompaniment of Talbot's guns, which now seemed to be all over the river, her little song became louder every time she sang it. Without being aware of it, the ending she supplied to the first two lines and last was not the original ending, but a schoolday version that had had no intention of being in the least prophetic or disrespectful.

And as the guns came nearer and nearer, in gig, canoe and launch, Bella's voice and Bella with it, rose higher and higher and higher until, with the aid of an empty kerosene can, she suddenly stood on the hogshead of tobacco; a fearsome looking, flowing-haired amazon, singing at the top of her lungs, and whirling the Winchester like the drum major of a pipe band.

The Campbells—are comin'—Jock Todd! Jock Todd!
The Campbells—are comin'—Jock Todd! Jock Todd!
The Campbells—are comin' to bonnie Loch Leven;
The Campbells—are comin'—Jock Todd! Jock Todd!

Which was not quite fair to the dusky rank and file of the W. A. F. F. since there was not a Campbell or a kilt among them.

"Bella! Come doon oot o' that! Are ye daft! Bella Imrie! Do ye hear me? Come doon oot o' that and sort your hair!"

But Bella only laughed down into John's shocked, amaze-filled face and pointed toward the fence near the gate.

"Did ye see that one, John? Look! I hung him on the fence! I hung him on the fence like a dish-cloot!"

So John lifted her down bodily and hid her behind a pile of scantlings as a Hausa gun-butt pounded on the oil-yard gate.

CHAPTER XXVI

"GENTLEMEN—THE KING"

CALVERT'S chin hung low upon his chest. His breathing was heavy and stertorous, and every now and then, Zatza the Pure, and the two shivering guards that were left to him, drifted off into a spotted, muddy haze that was occasionally lighted by stabs of flame that burned into the back of his head.

He was still tied to the hardwood post that upheld the corrugated iron awning of the kernel store, And no one would have suspected for a moment that he had been crowned a king.

Aye, a king. He had walked the street of N'ri, which is the street of the gods and the makers of kings, and he had walked to a throne. More than this, he would wear his crown till he died, whether the time was twenty minutes or twenty years.

It was more likely to be twenty minutes. But in his sane moments, when Zatza's little button eyes were almost clear again and the fear on the faces of his two remaining guards heartened him up a little, Calvert was bound to confess that Onwu-Biko, the ast born, was a man of ideas. He had something of a poet's soul; a Dante in his way.

In the role of Akka-Chuku, the sub-house-boy had been utterly and ruthlessly submerged. The simple magnificence had gone.

He had come stalking into the light of the hurricane lamps, a ghastly caricature in feathers, strung teeth, coral and ivory and chalk. Mostly chalk. At least, Calvert saw the chalk more than anything else because of the generous white circles of it around Akka-Chuku's eyes.

But the glamour of the simple Biko was all gone. Calvert had no desire to paint *this;* this side-show Wild Man of Borneo!

Also Calvert would never have bothered to notice whether this fellow's feet looked to have cushions in the soles of them or not. As Akka-Chuku, the man was nothing better than a gaudy colored advertisement trying to arouse a renewed interest in the N'ri family; and he had just given Allobar a demonstration of the efficiency of the N'ri family's remedies as a blood producer; just as if he were selling a patent medicine.

Yet—

Beneath all this bunkum was the poet; the man of eloquence with the sad eyes who said his prayers to the setting sun. And no matter how true it might be that there were no more kings among the Ibo, Onwu-Biko had assumed his priestly character and had exercised his priestly office to the limit of his powers. So that whatever came after the dawn, Akka-Chuku had crowned a king in the night.

Calvert did not see the slithering shadow off to his right, in the gutter that ran alongside the squat general warehouse. He did not see much of anything most of the time, and only occasionally could he hear the faintest hint of gunfire a long, long way off. And when he shook his head to clear his eyes and ears, his body roared aloud though his tongue gave forth not the slightest whimper.

At first there had been no sign of the curve-pointed knife. Only the voice of Onwu-Biko, the impassioned, speaking through the geegaws of his trade. And as Calvert, able to see quite clearly then, had looked into the chalk-encircled eyes, he had seen the whole madness of the night glowing there. It was a madness that laughed at Calvert with its head thrown back; this, though Biko's chin did not lift the fraction of an inch.

Then the Ibo began to speak, while Zatza had scurried nearer to hear and to see as well as she possibly could.

"In Calvert of Allobar there is the wisdom of the white and black. In him there is a kingdom. This do the sons of N'ri and the old men of the village speak. And this do I, Akka-Chuku know, for I would still be a slave in Calvert of Allobar's kingdom if the gods of the black water had not set me free."

Whether Biko actually believed this did not interest Calvert just them. He wanted the thing—whatever it was—over with.

"Zatza the Pure also was Calvert's slave," Biko went on, "and Lali, the daughter of Okpari, is the slave of his hands and feet forever. When Calvert of Allobar dies, then also will Lali die. And she will lie in the same grave, so that Calvert's eyes may be opened in spirit land. She can not escape. She has been flogged with knives that all men may know she is the slave of a kingdom that is yet without a king, for no son of N'ri has made the sign of the right hand."

It was at this point that Calvert knew that Biko was simply toying with him; flattering him with empty speech that was leading to something neither empty nor flattering.

And Zatza's little eyes came still nearer with a nasty-looking eagerness in them that made the other gaping faces round about become just mirrored repetitions slipping farther and farther away.

"Because the white man's gun has spoken, there are no more kings among the Ibo. So the sign of the right hand which the son of N'ri shall make, can not be the sign of the Ibo, or the white man's gun will speak again, and the Ibo will bleed till he droops to his knees. So the sign must be the sign of the white man whose kings are crowned with a circle."

Calvert's eyes leaped. Then closed; closed tightly, while he strained at his bonds and shut out the sight of the knife with the slightly curved point.

"A circle that goes about the head."

Greasy, oil-smeared arms flung themselves suddenly about his legs and under his chin. There was a piping sound of almost melodramatic, Drury Lane laughter, and then the curve-pointed knife made a slow-moving fire creep about his head.

When the fire stopped creeping, the coronation was over.

CALVERT had lost all track of time. But he knew Akka-Chuku would be back. For, of course, this was only the beginning; a mere preliminary to the real thing, which would probably be reserved for a quieter hour when Akka-Chuku would have more leisure to enjoy it.

And since Calvert could hardly see Zatza who was just a few feet away, and had some difficulty in hearing the rising, nervous chatter of his guards who seemed to be getting more and more excited about something or other that had to do with the river, it was not surprizing that he did not see or hear the approach of Lali, who, of late, had been doing quite a lot of traveling on her stomach.

Even Zatza did not see or hear anything until one of Calvert's guards, peering at the river and chattering too much to see or hear anything himself, grunted thickly and sprawled, with a stupid surprize upon his face, almost at Zatza's face.

The other guard leaped high and far and did not look back for an instant as that most terrorizing "Arrrgh!" of Lali's sounded an unmistakable death sentence in his ears.

Zatza squeaked. And perhaps it was just as well that Calvert could not see very plainly. But when Lali had finished stooping over the little faded blue print bundle and came toward him with the same knife, Calvert hoped she was going to remember how nicely he had bandaged her back.

For Lali did not look as if she would be likely to remember anything except the unpleasant things she might possibly imagine she had against him.

"'Lo—Lali," very thickly and hopefully, and far too sick and uncomfortable to do more than shudder a little on Zatza's account. "Oh—like that, eh? Good girl, even if your impulses are not as delicate as they might be sometimes. And not too rough, please. Ouch! The ropes, Lali, the ropes. Not my shins. Thanks. That's better. No hurry. No hurry at all.

"He'll be back. And we'll—what's that? Shooting? Who's shooting? Hunh. Thought everybody was dead long ago. If it's the last thing he does—oh, lord! My head! No, don't pull. I'm not going away. Everything's all right now. Li'l bit time pass, he come back. Li'l bit time— —— it, don't pull! Can't you understand plain English?"

Lali tugged at Calvert's arm to induce him to take advantage of the freedom she had given him, but he was rubbing his arms and wrists and trying to rub one ankle with the other foot, all at the same time, and as if there were not the slightest need for any kind of haste.

"Come 'way. You no fit to stay foh dis place. He come back and you no fit to fight um, all same you sick too much. Me, I go fix. Be my palaver. Come 'way."

Calvert tried to laugh at this, but laughing hurt, so he grumbled instead, as he cautiously tried to wipe his eyes in order to see better:

"All right. I walk li'l bit. That'll help the circulation. But he's my kill, young lady. Don't you forget that. One glimpse of him and I'll forget I have a head."

He walked a little way from the ironwood post, then turned impatiently and walked back, in spite of all Lali could do to stop him. And leaning against the post again, he said in all seriousness:

"He come back. He come back foh look me here. And he go look me! *Savez?*"

"You—you craze! You no fit to fight dat Biko. He be Akka-Chuku. He be *ju-ju!* He bring 'nother man—plenty ten time 'nother man! You sick. You craze. I beg you, Mis' Calvert, all same you be my frien', come 'way foh dis place!"

Calvert did not say anything for a little while; just looked down at Lali through a red haze, and vaguely listened to the louder shooting down river.

Then he said in all seriousness:

"Maybeso I sick. Maybeso I craze. But he go look me foh dis place. And he go find me. And I go kill him. Palaver set."

Again Lali pleaded, warning Calvert that Biko would not be alone, but Calvert did not seem to want to think about this, or care about it if he did. Then, he conceded indifferently:

"Suppose you want to look dis thing, be all right. But I no fit to come 'way. Maybe so I craze. Maybeso, I sick. But I go finis' this thing foh this time. Palaver set."

So he stood against the hardwood post again, just as Biko had left him, apparently with his hands tied behind it.

But after a while, when Lali, whimpering like a frightened child, crept off toward the blackness of the oil yard, Calvert's face lifted and became suddenly and terribly illuminated; all the more so because of the ghastly crown he wore. Then, in a breathing whisper—

"O God, deliver mine enemy into my hands!"

BIKO stepped from a two-paddle canoe on to Calvert's beach just about the time the Hausa gun butt was thumping on John Todd's oil yard gate. So that Biko did not have much time to waste on Calvert, and perhaps would not have wasted any at all if he had not suddenly found it imperative to take to the bush.

Aside from the circumstance that there no longer were "plenty time ten" Ibo on Allobar Creek, those who were still on it were so anxious to get off it that Biko, son of N'ri as he might be, had actually been rather lucky when he managed to comandeer a two-paddle canoe to carry himself and Oku, the fiery son of the late Otobo, as far as the Paller beach.

Oku was badly scared. His skin was the color of wet ashes, and his mouth was twisting and opening and shutting in a stupidly ugly fashion. He was minus part of an ear, which was disgraceful, and if he were caught he would be hung just as much for killing Kroo-boys as white men, none of which had happened to fall his way all night. So he was getting no real satisfaction out of life because, though he could look at the things Akka-Chuku would do to Calvert, there was no chance of him being allowed to do any of them himself.

Therefore, in addition to being scared to the shivering point, Biko's only companion was in a most disagreeable humor; just the humor in which he was most likely to be of most assistance to Biko under the circumstances.

Calvert did not see them until they turned the corner of the kernel store. They carried no lantern. But there was no mistaking Oku's swagger, which he immediately exaggerated for Calvert's benefit, and Akka-Chuku, of course, needed no illumination whatever to make him instantly recognizable.

First around the corner of the kernel store came Biko; then Oku; then— Calvert drew a long and silent breath. No more. Just these two. Just two.

Calvert made a pretense of straining weakly at his bonds; groaned; dropped his head a little and swayed it gently—very gently—from side to side.

He saw Biko stop short, because the guards were gone. Heard him mutter to himself, saw him catch his first sight of Zatza huddled beside the next nearest iron-wood post. Oku stopped, too. Biko shook the little bundle of bones, received no answer, looked sharply in Calvert's direction, paused, glanced still more sharply all about him, then, with Oku about half a foot ahead of him, came striding those last few necessary feet—necessary to Calvert, that is.

Calvert had forgotten he had a head; forgotten the blood in his eyes and ears and all over his neck and shoulders. And he was glad Oku was half a foot in advance of Biko, though he was just a little sorry Oku was really only a light weight. There would not be much satisfaction—

Suddenly, Calvert swayed forward, just as if he had become dizzy and was going to fall on his face. Since he was supposed to be tied up so that he could not fall, this part of his performance was startling enough; the succeeding part a shock.

With the sway, Calvert's right came up with a short and deadly snap that lifted Oku off his heels and set him down again several feet away.

And then, as Calvert was well aware, there was just one.

In the next instance, the left had followed the right straight into Biko's solar plexus;

straight, but hardly deep enough, though rather deeper than Biko liked and apparently as deep as Calvert wanted. He was not at all surprized when Biko just grunted, doubled in pain and backed away, fumbling instinctively for the curved-pointed knife.

In fact, Calvert's right foot came up so sharply—just as if the Ibo's bent head were a football—that it looked as if it had been all planned out in advance. So Biko straightened whether he liked it or not, reeling back a few steps, with one hand up to his chalk-covered face, the other displaying just the glint of a knife.

Calvert followed. He was going to kill this man, and he was going to do it with his hands and feet and nothing more, and so that the Ibo would not be so likely to run away, his left boot, then his right, and again his left crashed at Biko's knees and shins, then leaped together, as it seemed, for his mid-section.

They went down together in a heap and rolled over; and the knife, in passing, ripped Calvert's shirt and grazed his ribs. This told him where it was, so he rolled his body the other way, slammed a club-like fist into Biko's face, then made a grab for the knife hand as it came wildly up again.

He missed it, but it also missed him, so he lunged away from it and came lumbering to his feet again, with the Ibo still floundering around upon his back. Then Calvert, who did not care for rolling about the ground with a man who had a knife, kicked Biko in the ribs to encourage him to get up, which the Ibo did as quickly, but as cautiously as possible.

He was hurt all over; dazed and dizzy and, for the moment, at least, even more sick than Calvert; also he was almost blind with a seething passion against this man who had tricked him twice and flogged him just like any canoe-boy.

So when he came out of a crouch and leaped, the leap was a pretty enough thing to see, but its wildness was manifest even to Lali who was waiting in the dark, near the little side creek, not more than twenty yards from the fight.

Calvert met that leap of Biko's with a grunt of contempt, and with an upper cut that looked and sounded capable of tearing the man's head off, clutched at the knife hand and got it, hooking a particularly nasty right to Biko's jaw at the same time.

In a twinkling, the hand was twisted behind the Ibo's back in a grip that even Biko's slipperyness had no answer for; and when Calvert's left forearm was thrust across the Ibo's throat, forcing his head up and back, there came a guttural of unqualified approval from the vicinity of the little side creek.

Calvert paused. But he did not do this because he saw Lali creeping swiftly toward them. He saw nothing of much consequence for a few seconds, and acutely aware of the danger that lay in the swimming blackness that had suddenly seized him, he hung on to Biko even more savagely than there was any real need for.

Then came a few moments of clarity in which he appreciated the warning his head had just given him; a warning that said he would either conserve his strength in some way, or finish the thing very quickly.

Also, he realized that if he took Biko's knife away from him and asked him to fight it out without it, Biko would do nothing of the sort. He would take to his heels. And to allow Biko to retain the knife——

Calvert's forearm across Biko's throat loosened a little, then tightened again rather convulsively, as that same swimming blackness spun about him. Which was just as well, Calvert thought vaguely; for this man should surely die, and he had done nothing to deserve the chance to fight with a knife that really, at this moment, did not belong to him.

Yet in the back of Calvert's reeling head was that insistent small voice that whispered incessantly for him to go on and on until the thing were done.

And again the forearm across Biko's throat slipped a little and a little more. The hand that gripped Biko's knife had slipped, too. But Calvert did not know this. He seemed to be still groping in the dark to a decision, and presently, actually heard himself talking in Ibo to his captive:

"Blood for blood—this is the law of the Ibo. But the blood of Onwu-Biko upon my hands and feet, as I had sworn, would be a stench in my nostrils forever, like the stench of the blood of a bush dog in the nostrils of a king."

A conclusive shudder was Biko's only answer to this; a shudder that leaped queerly and carried him out of Calvert's slipping hands, only to slide oddly into a quiet and unmoving heap upon the ground at Calvert's feet.

Calvert did not see Lali at all, although she had struck not once but several times. She had crept in from behind and was crouching at his left elbow—which had been nearest to Biko's heart—and she was watching the twitching body on the ground in an awful expectancy that was not yet satisfied.

"A king," Calvert repeated thickly in English, his body swaying, his eyes literally reaching out to the deeper dark for the back of Biko's head, his hands dangling at his side, but his mind still believing that he held Biko's knife hand at his mercy.

"A king, —— you! So we'll use—a mango tree—and a rope."

And with Lali watching him warily and waiting for him to fall, so that she could finish what she had so silently and terribly begun, Calvert floundered to his knees and sprawled across the Ibo's body.

CHAPTER XXVII

PALAVER SET

ACCORDING to Captain Talbot's version of the fight on the government beach, he had had all the luck. Nothing had gone wrong; not after the first hour or so. The machine-gun had not jammed, there happened to be all the ammunition a man could possibly hope for, with or without prayer.

The men had been wonderfully steady right from the start, and after a bit of really nasty work, it hadn't been much of a trick to hold them together. A messy business, of course, more messy than anything else. Awful! Let's shut up about it.

In the succeeding few days, Calvert also wished everybody would shut up about it. More particularly did he wish that inquisitive people would stop asking questions.

Talbot and John Todd who found him within an hour after he had fallen across Akka-Chuku's body, had a great many questions to ask, not only about his head, but also about the several other things they found—and did not find—in his immediate vicinity.

They found Akka-Chuku, of course, with several knife wounds in and around his heart; wounds which Calvert was genuinely surprized to hear about. They found Zatza the Pure, and Oku, the son of the late Otobo.

Oku was not dead, but he seemed to be suffering from a kind of paralysis due to a dislocated or badly-jolted spinal column; and Calvert's only explanation for this was:

"I just hit him. He's really only a light weight."

But Calvert had no enlightening remarks to make about his own head, or on the subject of the possible whereabouts of Akka-Chuku's eyes and Zatza the Pure's right hand. Apparently these items were not where they should have been; but, as Calvert remarked wryly, when he had absorbed this choice morsel of information—

"After a night like that almost anything was likely to be missing."

Even Lali. There was not a sign of her; and though Calvert, who decided to go to the Canaries to recuperate and get away from questions, tried to induce Lali by messenger to come and explain things to him privately, he learned that she had apparently gone back to Nishi where she probably felt that the atmosphere of the old home town and her father's house would be more restful and healthful for a time.

He puzzled a little over the knife wounds in Akka-Chuku's body and wondered if he could possibly have taken the Ibo's knife away from him and killed him with it. There was just a chance that he might have done this after everything became so foggy and black. But he could not remember just what had happened after he twisted Akka-Chuku's knife hand behind him.

He had been all right until he did that; all right so long as he kept tearing along, just hands and feet and no head to speak of. But stopping suddenly like that seemed to shut off the current. In any case—well, he would see Lali again when he came back from the Canaries.

The rain of interrogation marks that descended upon him was more responsible for his going than his head, although the latter was reason enough.

In addition to Talbot and John Todd and Bella and almost everybody else who was still alive, there came to Allobar in the succeeding few days, detachments of the W. A. F. F. from Onitsha and Warri and Sapeli and various other places, and for a little while the Government of the Gun spoke to Allobar in a corrective tone of voice.

And, of course, the white officers and civil officials and members of the medical staff, anxious for really first hand information, all asked Calvert questions.

He gave them, with variations, the same answer on everything.

"I don't remember."

But Talbot and John Todd knew he was lying like a shop thief, and since he seemed to have captured Akka-Chuku all over again, there was not very much more to be done or said about it.

Ruth Kenley, however, did not ask any questions; not though, with MacConnachie and several others, she sailed on the same ship as Calvert did.

"It was only a little mistake," she was repeating over and over again in a whispery voice. "Such a little mistake. No man should be asked to pay like this for a little, little mistake like that. How could Walter know the man was that awful Akku-Chuku? How could any one know? Mr. Calvert was terribly intoxicated and Walter just thought—oh, it isn't fair! It really isn't fair."

This was in the beginning. Later, of course, when she reached home and new surroundings and interests had blotted out the horror of Allobar which had so ruthlessly trampled her under foot, Captain Talbot began to receive coherently apologetic letters in reply to the slouchingly sympathetic kind he wrote, and by the time his leave came round again, there was not much doubt about the manner in which he would spend it.

He did not come back to Allobar. Instead he dropped into a soft billet on the government house staff in Lagos, and his official designation to fill it had to be that of colonel. But although for something more than the proverbial nine days, he had been the most famous man along the Coast, he slouched around the government house just as he had slouched around the barracks at Allobar.

His wife did not accompany him; not at first. Ruth decided it would be just as well if she stayed at home and missed the rainy season. Then, perhaps she would be able to pluck up courage to look upon other women's vegetable gardens in Lagos.

WHEN John and Bella Todd had seen Calvert off on the stern-wheeler that carried him down to Forcados and the *Segwanga*, they returned to their own beach and sat side by side on the bungalow veranda just as usual.

John never had much to say at any time, but he said nothing at all now; just looked steadily at the river glistening so brightly in the late afternoon sunshine. Presently Bella, who was watching him, said simply—

"It must be kind o' nice to get aboard a boat like that, and know ye're goin' hame."

"Aye, Bella." John did not turn his head. "It is that. But it'll not be long now."

"Och, ye're not to think I'm wishin'——"

"I wouldna blame ye."

"Och, no, John. I couldn't leave ye here to be murdered in your bed an' me safe and sound in Abertinny. I wouldna think o't, John."

"I wouldn't blame ye," John repeated, still looking steadily at the river.

"Are ye—are ye wantin' me to go, John?"

"I think it would maybe be best."

"John!"

"Aye. A lassie that has such a knack o' fightin' like you, shouldna live in a place like this."

"Och, John! That doesna—I mean does not make any sense."

"Ye have too much opportunity to practise," John completed, still talking to the river. "And I dinna like to have folk say that my wife is the worth o' three men when it comes to killin' folk."

Bella smiled, but there was just a touch of wistfulness in it, as her eyes followed in the churning wake of the stern-wheeler.

"Aye, John. I'm an awful woman when there's killin' to be done. Terrible! But ye're no' such a bad hand at fightin' yoursel'. No. I'se warrant ye're not."

John turned his head slowly and fixed his wife with a most penetrating eye.

"When ye were standin' on that hogshead, wi' your hair doon your back, were ye singin' that song at *me?*"

"No, John. I wasna—I mean was not thinkin' o' ye."

"Then, where did ye get that 'Jock Todd' bit from?"

"We used to say it that way when I was a bairn, afore I ever met ye or thought o' ye."

John looked doubtful about this, but as Bella did not seem to care whether he believed it or not, he thought it might be advisable to take her word for the truth of it.

So he turned his face toward the river and lapsed into silence.

Bella's smile broadened then drifted, and the succeeding little shake of her head was expressive enough. But her glance, after a second or two, wandered absently in the wake of the stern-wheeler, and wandered so far and so long, she did not know John's head had come around again and that he was watching her.

He did not say anything, and his long, solemn face was not capable of expressing much sentiment. But after a while he rose and stood quietly beside his wife's chair, the tips of his fingers barely touching her head. When she looked up hurriedly, and as if he had caught her red-handed, she hardly saw him.

"Och, John," in a very small voice. "I—I didna mean to greet."

"If ye'd like to go—" quietly.

"No," quickly, "no, John. It's just—I was seein'—I mean—och, I'm not so much o' a man after a'."

And as John's large and clumsy hand awkwardly stroked her hair, he had an odd sensation that the woman who was his wife had come back to him.

CALVERT did not escape from questions either on the *Segwanga*, on which he sailed, or at Las Palmas where he discarded the bandages about his head.

After MacConnachie and a Marsden's man and a survivor of the Oil Rivers Company had all grown husky and tired of telling the story over and over again, everybody on the *Segwanga*, as it seemed to Calvert, wanted to hear the story of his head and of the killing of Zatza and Akka-Chuku.

It was the same at Las Palmas where all, or nearly all, West African boats stopped for long enough to allow their passengers to go ashore.

So, in less than three months, Calvert was back in Allobar where every one had talked out on the subject of Akka-Chuku, and where life in the interval of a very few weeks, had drifted back into its old groove, which had simply been dusted and sand-papered a little to make it smoother than before.

Yet, in the short time he had been away, the change that had been wrought in Calvert's appearance was at once manifest to any one who had had any sort of acquaintance with him.

It was not that the red rims about his eyes were gone, nor that his face was leaner and firmer and his tawny hair touched with a magisterial streak of gray.

Neither was it the ragged blue-white line that, when he did not furrow his brows too much, was visible all the way across his forehead; the continuation of the "crown" being, of course lost in his shock of hair.

There was something about Calvert, besides a state of health and well being, that made John Todd's eyebrows come down as he peered at him questioningly every now and then when they would be talking together; and made Bella say to him on one occasion:—

"Man, ye—ye look just—just—och, just grand!"

Calvert did not laugh at this. In fact, he felt rather guilty. For, of late, there had been a lift to his feet and a quiet inside his head such as had not been there in years—if ever before.

It was not virtue. It was not reform. There had been no new leaves turned by his hand; no resolution taken, no plans or decisions made. He was still as fond of a drink and as rotten a judge of women as ever; and he knew he was. Yet he drank but little and he was quite sure his poor judgments of the future would not disturb his slumbers in the slightest.

And once, when he dropped in at the Todds on his way back from paying some customs duties at the treasury office, John and Bella watched him come up the path from the gig-wharf and later watched him go down again.

Presently John said, as if he had been trying to say it for some time and could not find just the right word—

"That man minds me o' a lion."

"Aye," hurriedly. "That's it! A lion wi' its head up. I never saw sic' a change in a man in my life. It's no canny. And that queer scar across his forehead—ye'd think it would spoil him. But ——"

And Bella stopped there because there did not seem to be any explanation for it; at least, not one that she could give.

CALVERT did not send for Lali. She came and stood in his office doorway late one afternoon on her own accord. And had he seen her cross the beach past the kernel store—even over the spot where Akka-Chuku had died—he would never have suspected that she had anything to do with the killing.

Also, he would have observed that though she wore her overcloth higher and tighter than was customary, no one whispered as she passed or looked at her with any hint of forbidden knowledge showing in her eyes.

The overcloth she wore was of the finest "real India" the A. P. A. shop had in stock. The light blue and yellow silk handkerchief about her head was the best she could get on Marsden's beach, which made something of a specialty of silks. And she looked to Calvert to be several years younger.

When she first appeared there was a suggestion of timidity in her manner, but when he asked her to come in and sit down, a fair assumption of her old swagger came back to her. Yet it was plain that Calvert's appearance staggered her.

"I come look you, li'l bit," she announced simply enough, eyeing him up and down as he stood at a corner of his desk. "Sick palaver done go 'way?"

"Done go 'way, long time. I strong too much. Thanks for inquiring."

Lali took another look at him, then stopped at his forehead. And it stopped there so long Calvert began to feel rather uncomfortable, Then she said with a great deal of conviction—

"Dat Akka-Chuku *savez ju-ju* too much."

"What's matter?" Calvert asked and his hand went up to his forehead instinctively.

But Lali shook her head slowly.

"I no *savez*. Be *ju-ju*, I no *savez ju-ju*."

"What be *ju-ju?*"

"Dat." Lali pointed straight at Calvert's forehead. "Akka-Chuku do um. I look um. I live foh dis beach all time you tie up foh ke'nel store post. And I heard Akku-Chuku say he go make you king all same white man king and—and ——"

She looked Calvert up and down again rather hopelessly several times, always coming back to the scar; then shook her head once more.

"I savez he fit to make black man *ju-ju*, but I no *savez* he fit to make white man *ju-ju*. Plenty soon you go be king propah, all same dem king foh Mas' Dilby office."

The king in Dilby of Marsden's office was an old print of King Edward VII as Prince of Wales in the uniform of a famous regiment; so that Calvert had no complaint to make on the question of Lali's choice of a comparison.

But, thinking that she had looked him over quite enough, he tried to turn her attention more definitely to the late Onwu-Biko, the last born.

And this, augmented somewhat by the whispering tales of the surrounding villages, was the gist of what he got.

Onwu-Biko, as his name signified, was the last born and only surviving son of his mother. He had been born in a canoe on Allobar Creek at sunset and his mother had died at his birth.

This explained why his gods had been gods of the water; why he had had a reverence for the dying sun, and it also explained the reason for the sacrificial ceremony on Allobar Creek in preference to any other creek.

For Onwu-Biko had been a son of N'ri and he had been reared in the priesthood, although his inclinations had leaned more toward fighting than chanting incantations and killing fowls and sheep and the like for the daily sacrifices of the minor order.

And when he had reached man's estate, he finally found himself in possession of many priestly gifts, but with an unabated longing to fight, and with an ambition, which became an obsession to the point of madness, to fight the Government of the Gun with its own weapons.

This had ultimately led to the Allobar adventure; to the sacrifice on the river, partly as a kind of commemoration ceremony and partly as an indication to Allobar in general, and Otobo in particular, that he was not afraid of the Gun.

No real insurrection had been planned or thought of at that time. But after the capture of himself and Zatza by Calvert, fear and rage combined had dictated his every action. Previously, he had mocked at Zatza's fear of Calvert, and his visit to the trader in broad daylight had been just such another bit of bombast as the chopping of heads on Allobar Creek; with the difference that it had not worked quite so well.

Naturally, when he was free again, he had a little more faith in Zatza's warnings and, keeping most carefully away from the Paller beach, nursed his vanity and his revenge at the same time, with most appalling results.

As Calvert could vouch for, the man had an inspiring personality, particularly when he talked; and his eloquence had evidently swept the bulk of Allobar into the cup of his hand. And the fact that he had convinced a cautious, if vicious, chief like Otobo, of the probability of success, was sufficient proof of his ability as an orator whatever his soldier-like gifts had been.

Unquestionably, the Allobar section of

Iboland now felt that it had been little more than a weapon in Onwu-Biko's hand; a weapon he had used, as others have done before him, for the gratification of his own private grudges and ambitions. And it was reasonably certain that the next inspired priest or warrier who came to the Allobar district with proposals of a similar sort, would not have a very comfortable time of it.

Of the thin blue light, the nearest guess Calvert could make was the string of a large captured kite, the string being possibly a thin rope smeared with phosphorus or some such luminous chemical probably stolen from the government stores during Onwu-Biko's sojourn on the government beach.

The string set alight would undoubtedly show a broader flame and when the kite itself caught fire the resultant "bursting effect" of the whole contraption would be manifest to a man in Calvert's position and condition at that time.

In any event, since no one seemed to be able to explain this particular part of Akka-Chuku's *ju-ju* program, and no other white man had been near enough to see anything but the sudden flare of light at the end, Calvert thought his guess was as good as any, and stopped bothering about it.

Then Calvert became very personal in a simple and most unaffected way.

"Be you kill Akka-Chuku?"

Lali was surprized; shocked even.

"You no look me!" she asked indignantly. "You no get eye foh dat time?"

"No, Lali. I no get eye foh dat time. And Akka-Chuku no get eye them time gov'ment come. Be you do um?"

He knew this question was unnecessary, but he liked to see Lali shrug those silken black shoulders of hers, and she never shrugged them more superbly than she did then.

And that was all the answer he ever got on the subject.

So he went to his desk and uncovered a very small package which he opened then and there. It contained a ring set with a really good ruby of fair size. He had thought the color appropriate when he had bought it in Las Palmas, and he now held it out to Lali, little box and all.

Lali was not unaccustomed to gifts of all kinds. The piece of "real India" she was wearing was one of the many pieces she had chosen at Bella Todd's expense in the A. P. A. shop. But this gift of Calvert's made her come to her feet in slow wonder, the whites of her eyes leaping suddenly into prominence.

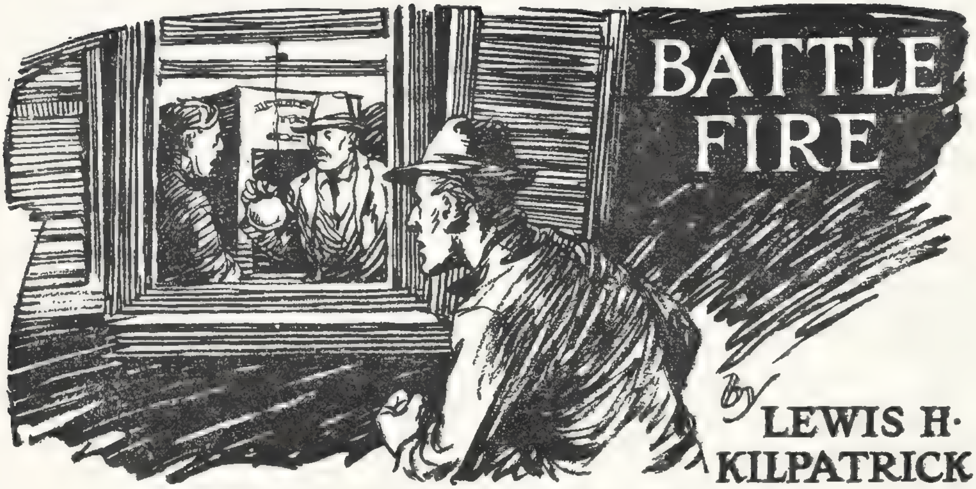
She had seen glass "rubies" and glass "diamonds," and she had seen diamonds that were large and real on her father's hands, but never had she seen a real ruby; nothing like this. So she took the little box from Calvert's hand as if she were afraid it was *not* really meant for her.

Once in the grasp of her eager fingers, she did not instantly try to see what finger it would fit. She just closed her hand over it as tightly as possible, and waited with a most commendable patience and courtesy to give Calvert a chance to say something if he wanted to.

But Calvert was merciful.

"Palaver set."

THE END



BATTLE FIRE

by LEWIS H. KILPATRICK

Author of "The Death Watch," "Mountain Pride," etc.

OLD GRANT HOWARD, seated at the desk in his bare-walled office, studied the figures on the pad before him with glowering gray eyes and an inward anger that muttered through his lips like approaching mountain thunder.

A pair of crutches leaned in the corner behind him; just above was tacked a large map of Kentucky; there was a safe, a steel filing cabinet, three cane-bottom chairs, and nothing else in the room except a rag rug on the unvarnished floor. Yet from this sanctum, hidden away in a drab foothill village, was being developed the most ambitious mercantile scheme in all Southern Appalachia.

"A clean thirty thousand dollars burnt to ashes," old Grant exclaimed aloud, striking the pad with his huge fist. "Two full stocks and two good storehouses that I couldn't carry a bit of insurance on, plumb gone. But that ain't the worst of it. Them West Virginia fellers are eatin' in on me by the day and settin' up for themselves at Howard City. If I lose out there, my whole idea's cracked. And I can't keep on spendin' piles of money in one place when I'm needin' every cent I own for twenty other stores!"

The grizzled merchant chieftain was about to continue rehearsing his problem to himself when the office door opened and in stepped a young man, a physical replica of what his father had been three decades before.

Calloway Howard, more than six feet tall, broad, and thick with muscle, early had his blondness stained by the Kentucky sun; but his eyes were still a fresh blue, steady if alert, his features smooth and clean, and his heavy growth of hair was thrown up from the brow by an incorrigible cowlick. His head was bared now, his slouch hat in one hand, and a specially made suit of gray tweed bagged over his straight limbs and torso.

A pleasant picture of vigorous mountain manhood he made, standing there smiling slightly, awkwardly—but his father's reaction was not so pleasant.

Old Grant stared at him a moment, speechless. Then his anger forgot the figures on the desk and focused itself on his son.

"You—you—" he choked, reddening. "Cal Howard, you ought to be strapped! If it wasn't for this crippled leg of mine, by ——, I'd do it, too. Run out of college-school again and jailed for disorderly conduct— What have you done since?" he demanded. "Did you break jail? I wrote 'em to keep you there. Is the Lexington sheriff after you?"

He reared in his chair, but, dragged by the paralyzed limb, sank back again.

"Cal Howard," he charged, "you're a shame and a disgrace to me and the mammy who died a-bornin' you!"

The young man's smile weathered the tirade, but his tone was sincerely anxious.

"Pap," he warned, "you'd better be careful. Recollect what the doctor said: If

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"Battle Fire," copyright, 1925, by Lewis H. Kilpatrick.

you keep on losin' your temper, you'll have another stroke."

The elder Howard gulped, but his fury cooled slowly.

"That ain't what I asked you," he snapped. "I want to know if you've a right to be free and when you got here?"

Calloway's own cheeks colored.

"I served my full time, ten days," he answered, "and had enough money to pay my fine. A stranger fetched me over from the junction in his automobile a while ago, so I didn't have to wait for the night train. I stopped by the house and got late dinner."

"Sit down!"

The young mountaineer obediently took one of the cane-bottom chairs and his father drew a letter from a basket on his desk.

"I got this from the State University president," he resumed, "tellin' me everything. He said as how you weren't doin' any good in your books, to begin with; then he wrote of this latest trouble.

"You had some words with a street cyar conductor, accordin' to the president, because you had to ride standin' up and he charged you full fare. When the cyar stopped next, there were some meat calves bein' drove by. You got out quick, picked up one of the calves and h'isted it on to the platform, 'lowin' to the conductor that since his was a cattle cyar, the critter had a right to ride too. He tried to put you off, and of course you got mad. And, says this letter, it took him and two policemen to tame you down enough to be hauled to jail. Ain't that the way it was?"

Calloway, twisting his hat brim between his knees, nodded.

"But I only meant it for a joke," he explained, "until that conductor he made out to hit me. Then I had to beat him up."

Grant Howard ignored the excuse and fixed his son with cold gray eyes.

"Four years ago," he went on, "I sent you down to Berea. But you wouldn't learn and were always losin' your temper and fightin', and they turned you out. Then I started you at that Winchester church school. You done purty well there for a while; but one day when a professer was teachin' you to box, he hit you on the nose, you got mad—and mighty near killed him and all them who tried to interfere. That cost me a heap of money for damages and lost you your place there.

"Now you've been expelled from State University. Do you reckon there's any other college-school in the country that'll take a feller with such a name for trouble as you have?"

Calloway faced the old man stubbornly, his smile gone—and Calloway, in that humor, was immobile as his native hills.

"Pap, I ain't goin' to college any more," he said shortly. "I'm gettin' too old. Some day, maybe, I'll knock off and commence a course of home-study; but now I'm tired of books and professers and fotched-on ways. These here mountains is where I belong."

An expression of acute disappointment shadowed the father's rugged face. His anger had passed; Calloway was his only child, and old Grant loved him with a passion that transcended every other emotion. Ambitious for himself, forced by necessity to snatch what education he could as he worked, guided by a tremendous vision, he was still more ambitious for his son and knew that Calloway must have that mental equipment which he lacked to fully realize the future he planned for him.

"Son—" the father spoke gently, leaning over the desk toward him—"these Kaintucky mountains are goin' to be different in another several years from what they are now. When the State and Government get the Blue Grass Trail and Cumberland Highway built, openin' this country to the rest of the world, there'll be a big and quick change. Mountain folks will know more and want more then, and educated folks will come up from down below and settle. Bottoms and hillsides, that are hardly used now, will be crowded with oil derricks and coal tipples. And where there's a village today, a city will grow. And, while them cities are growin', somebody will have the chance to make a pile of money and keep on makin' it. That's the time I'm lookin' to, Cal, with all my work and schemin'."

Grant Howard turned in his chair, reached to the corner for a crutch and with it pointed to the map above his head.

"There's the Cumberland Highway—" indicating with the crutch tip a line that ran north and south through the Kentucky mountains—"and there goes the Blue Grass Trail, west and east, from near Lexington to the West Virginia boundary. Each of 'em will be about two hundred and fifty miles long, every inch of it fit for automobile travel. Right here—" touching the point where the Trail and Highway would intersect—"is Howard City, shore to be the greatest town in the hills and what you might call the axle for my wheel of stores. Goin' out from Howard City, north and south along the Highway and east and west along the Trail, I'll have a general store and automobile garage every twenty-five miles.

"Cal, your grandsire served under a Southern fighter in the Civil War who always said: 'Get there first with the most men—and you'll win the battle.' My sayin' is: Get there first with the best and cheapest line of goods, and you'll win and hold the biggest trade.

"With that in mind, I've bought or leased the twenty-one sites I need, and a store of some sort is doin' business on each of 'em right now. Later, as these roads get done, I'll put up better buildin's and the garages. And later still, when enough people come in and the country develops, I'll add more stores to what I've got.

"Now, son—" the old man again turned to him, his eyes aglow with the flame of his vision—"it'll take a mighty smart man to handle such a business as that. I can live to go just so far with it, then it'll be left to you. By that time rich furriners will have come into these hills with their newfangled knowledge and ways, and have set up in business against you. No ordinary mountain feller will be able to stand up to them. Then our own folks, as they learn more of the world, will want the best of goods and sellin' notions.

"Cal, that's why you've got to know somethin' besides readin' and writin' and figgerin'. You've got to be as smart as them furriners who are comin', to hold your ground and get your share of the trade. That's my reason for wantin' to give you an education, the finest that money can buy. Then, when I'm gone and this country is what it's shore to be, you can take up and carry on what I'll have only begun."

Grant Howard, concluding, leaned back in his chair and watched the effect of his words on his son.

Calloway had listened patiently, respectfully. He had heard much the same thing many times before; and now, as then, his father's enthusiasm ignited no responsive tinder within him.

"Pap," the young man began hesitatingly, "I'm willin' to help you all I can in your business and do my best to carry it on when you get too feeble. But I just naturally don't take to book-learnin', and furrin ways ain't my ways."

The father sighed heavily. He knew the adamantine nature of his son and realized his inability to break it.

"When it comes to common labor," he said, "you're worth two men and a mule in the cornfield. And where there's a ruction on, you can whop as many fellers as you can reach. But, Cal, big muscles and a fightin' temper haven't any place in my business. It's run by brains and the fingers that hold a pen. Your virtues are a plumb dead loss to me."

"Wal, I don't know." Calloway shrugged his powerful shoulders. "These hills ain't entirely tamed yet. There's still parts of 'em where a couple of hard-hittin' fists are respected more than law and gospel."

He looked quizzically at his father.

"Just before I came in here, a while ago, I heard you talkin' mighty loud to yourself about the trouble at Howard City. Is Frank Wilgus still your manager over there?"

Old Grant scowled and drummed a forefinger on the figured pad.

"Yes," he answered; "and a squarer, harder-workin' feller never lived. I saved Frank from drownin' off a log raft once and he's never forgot it. He's worse broke up over these two fires than I am—but we differ on how they started. He says they were just an accident, while I hold it's these West Virginia furriners who caused 'em. They're settin' up at the City too and want to run me out of there.

"And, Cal—" the merchant chieftain slowly shook his head—"they've very near done it. I can't keep on puttin' up buildin's and sendin' stocks of goods there just to be destroyed. It costs more money than I can afford.

"Of course I've wrote the sheriff of that county my suspicions. But he's an ornery sort, and I'm too crippled to ride and see about things myself. If this new brick store goes like the others, I'll have to lay down on my plans at that point and just hold to my land. Even you know what that'll mean."

Calloway did know. He was instinctively loyal to his father's interests, and a sullen flush came into his cheeks.

Directly he rose and put on his hat, possessed of a challenging idea.

"I've been told there's good fishin' in Buckthorn Creek," he said carelessly, "not far from Howard City. If you don't need me here, sir, reckon I'll go over and find out for myself. Bass are scarce near these settlements."

His father grunted, turning to his desk.

"Need you here?" he repeated. "Hump! I've got all the freight hands I want and fighters are useful only in the army. Fishin's about the most harmless thing you know how to do. Go on—and introduce yourself to Frank when you get there. But don't you dare meddle with the business!"

Calloway chuckled in reply, opened the door and left the office.

THE next day, wearing an old corduroy suit, a blue cotton shirt, brogans and a shabby slouch hat, he started on horseback for Buckthorn Creek. Slung behind his saddle was a pack containing two blankets, a change of clothing, fishing tackle and a few cooking utensils. The young mountaineer never carried or used a gun.

When a boy, among his native hollows, he once had stood with his father over the body of a slain cousin.

"A hasty temper and a slow trigger finger done that," said Grant Howard. "Death most often gets them who are al'ays ready to give death. Cal, swear to me here that yo'll never tote a gun."

Calloway gave his oath and had kept it rigidly.

Later father and son saw a steel door clank shut on another kinsman, convicted of manslaughter.

"That's what comes of follerin' drinkin'," the boy was told. "A Howard's naturally mean enough when he's r'iled without havin' that stuff in him. Promise me, Cal, yo' won't tech a drap of liquor so long as yo' live."

That oath, too, was given and being kept, in spite of frequent temptations.

Now Calloway went unarmed and soberly thoughtful on what he sensed was a dangerous investigation. Dullard that he was in study hall and class room, the mountains knew him as a master student of their secrets and lore, and from his father he inherited no little of that acumen which had graduated Grant Howard from a single country store to his present position of commercial leadership.

Buckthorn Creek was a rough sixty-odd miles from the foothill village, whose railroad facilities made it old Grant's headquarters. Calloway left his horse at the last cabin where he was acquainted and, shouldering his pack, continued the journey on foot. He had never been to Howard City, so named through his father's political influence, and had never met Frank Wilgus or any one else from that vicinity. Thus he was a complete stranger there.

The embryonic city was on a mile-square plateau, where the mountains broke away and circled round about in green, forested walls. A few drab huts stood there originally; but, since this point had been assured the intersection of the Blue Grass Trail and Cumberland Highway, the settlement had become a town. Future streets and avenues were surveyed and marked. There were several modern homes, two frame churches, a doctor's office, a blacksmith shop, a general store kept by a native, the tinned mercantile establishment of the West Virginia syndicate, and, across from it on the principal corner, the two-story new brick building that bore Grant Howard's name.

Calloway selected a secluded spot on Buckthorn Creek, a convenient distance from the town, and there, under the lip of a cliff, made camp.

To the folk of that neighborhood, when they happened by, he gave a logical account of himself. He was Cal Harmon, he told them, from over near Jackson-town, in Breathitt. Frankly, he had had some trouble with the Lexington constables, while attending court day in that city, had managed to escape, but, upon the advice of his sheriff, left home until the demand for him quieted.

He was religious and didn't drink liquor, run sets or tote a gun. Ordinarily he followed farming for a living. Yes, much obliged; he would drop around some day and take a meal and the night, and maybe fetch the woman a mess of fish. No, he wasn't interested in these new roads everybody was talking about. The old dirt 'uns were good enough for him. He was just a plain mountain codger, with plain mountain ways and notions.

Calloway did catch some fish and occasionally accepted the hospitality of his neighbors. But he also had to make frequent trips to town for supplies. There he readily identified the manager of his father's store.

Frank Wilgus was tall and lean, with keen small eyes and a stringy brown mustache. Jay Tolson, his chief assistant, was of the same shrewd native type; while Hiram, another clerk, was dull and brawny, and Leck, the boy of all work, little better than a cheerful half-wit.

The store's new stock contained everything, from clay pipes to plows, boxed cakes to gingham dresses, that a mountain family could want. Once inside the big sales rooms, neither the hillman nor his wife would have reason to go purchasing elsewhere.

"Those West Virginia fellers don't seem so bad," Calloway analyzed to himself after a week's observation. "Their stock isn't nearly as complete as Pap's and he's undersellin' 'em. 'Pears to me the worst they're doin' is holdin' on until the town grows and there's business enough for several stores. I can't think, from the looks of 'em and what I hear, that they'd go so far as destroy property.

"Then, too, Frank Wilgus is the most powerful man in the city, representin' pap as he does. He's of the mountains himself and popular with the citizens here, and a furriner would be afraid to do anything against him. That West Virginia company would know that they'd be the first ones suspected of deviltry. And, at a word from Frank, there wouldn't be a splinter of 'em left.

"Maybe he's right and those fires were accidental. He doesn't strike me as bein' a fool."

A few days later, however, Calloway was of a somewhat different opinion. On coming to town he saw red-lettered cloth signs, stretched across the two fronts of the store, announcing a below-cost cash sale of the entire stock. Road wagons, carts, saddle-horses and saddle-mules lined the adjacent streets, and crowds of hillfolk, men, women and children, wove in and out of the building, haggling and buying.

The region was peopled with valley farmers, more prosperous than the average mountaineers, and money was comparatively plentiful.

Young Howard, for the first time conscious of pride in his father's business, swore in chagrin.

"Pap's got bluffed and is closin' out," he exclaimed silently. "He must be figgerin' on gettin' what he can for this stock before it goes like the others.

"But, ——!" he scowled some minutes later, after making a few purchases. "He could better afford to haul this stuff to one of his other stores than sell it at such prices. Three cans of sardines for a nickel, calico at six cents a yard, saddles goin' for five dollars—Frank ought to have more judgment than let pap lose that way. It ain't nowise necessary."

Calloway was about to reenter the building, identify himself to Wilgus and make a protest. Then, reconsidering, he sauntered across to the rival store, whose imported manager and one clerk were taking a forced holiday.

"I want half a dozen sinkers," he said. "Them fellers over yonder are too busy to wait on me."

"Yes," growled the West Virginian; "but they won't be busy much longer."

His vexation made him loquacious.

"Grant Howard's sales here are defeating his own purpose," he declared. "They're glutting this country so with stuff that the people won't have to spend another dime for years to come."

The young man's eyebrows lifted.

"Does he have these sales often?" he inquired.

"About once a year," replied the manager. "That is, he sold out just before each of the two fires. It was lucky for him he did, I reckon," he added. "Otherwise he'd have lost his goods along with the buildings. Even less than the wholesale price was better than nothing."

Calloway hid his astonishment. The fire losses, as reported to him by his father, included both the buildings and their full stocks. Each conflagration had occurred a few weeks after the store, with laden shelves and floors, opened for business. That accounted for the little money old Grant received from each investment. His manager and clerks simply had not had time to sell any more goods before the flames wrought complete destruction.

Young Howard pocketed his sinkers, expressing casual sympathy for the West Virginians' lack of custom.

"Aw, we won't have to rot here much longer," was the answer. "Grant Howard may be wasting his money and cutting his own throat, but he's knifing every other merchant too. Our company surely will see, when I write of this sale, that they haven't a chance here. We won't be able even to give away chewing tobacco after this week. I'm for closing up and quitting."

"Anyhow," thought Calloway, leaving the store, "pap's beatin' these fellers even if he doesn't know it."

Loitering about the streets, nibbling a noon luncheon of cheese and crackers, gossiping with a native now and then, he made certain other pertinent observations.

Mountain retailers of a considerable radius, informed of the sale, had come to town with their wallets and wagons and were hauling home merchandise whose cost assured them large profits. Jay Tolson's brother owned Howard City's third general store, and he was stocking up from the common source with staples that would be in regular demand. Hiram, the herculean clerk, about to marry, was sending to a cottage he had just built such furnishings as gaudy lithographs, straw rugs, tinware, a cheap graphophone and installment-plan chairs and tables. The boy Leck, busily opening boxes and crates at the rear of the store, was attired in a new checkered suit and red-banded straw hat. The store itself, on this third afternoon of the sale, was fast being emptied.

"My ol' woman's even bought her a buryin' dress," chuckled a good-natured trader in Calloway's hearing. "I 'lowed hit won't pleasure her none at the time she wears hit, but she 'lowed she'd never git one cheaper. And she's bound to need hit some day, she says."

"Wal," drawled his companion, pointing to a heaped farm wagon, "I've spent all my cash money and got enough o' ever'thing to do me for life. That Grant Howard, whosomever he is, shore is a friend to po' folks. I reckon if he tuck a vote, he could git the hull county named fer him."

"Yas, he sartainly is clever," the trader agreed. "But I've heerd Frank Wilgus say that he's got a pow'fully troublesome boy. The young limb! He ain't any use er comfort a-tall to his pappy."

The second mountaineer nodded.

"I've heerd the same thing," he gossiped. "Hit's norated 'round the store that the boy's been penitentiared fer stealin' calves er somethin'. He's jest naturally no 'count, I reckon."

Calloway, flushing, moved on down the street.

"Maybe I sorta deserve such talk," he muttered. "Pap's put more into me than he's ever got out. But give me time to study over this thing, and I'll prove I ain't all big muscles and a fightin' temper."

STARTING out of town toward his camp on Buckthorn Creek, he came to a section of building lots, staked off and terraced, that obviously would be the preferred sites for future homes. Howard City, after the two great highways were completed, as his father predicted, would swiftly become the metropolis of the Kentucky Mountains. Any one with foresight and capital could assure himself tremendous profits by investing in real estate there now.

With a mind suddenly sharpened to business possibilities, Calloway lingered near the terraced lots until a woman, with four bundle-laden children, approached.

"Mis'," he inquired, "do you happen to know who owns this here land?"

The woman responded readily.

"Frank Wilgus owns most o' hit, I'm tole. He's been buyin' up a sight o' land around here lately. I reckon he's figgerin' on goin' in fer farmin'."

Calloway, with narrowed eyes, growled something to himself. Then, aloud:

"Mr. Wilgus must have a sight of money. Are you acquainted with him?"

"Law—yas!" she exclaimed, not without some pride. "I used to know Frank when he was po' as a skinned snake. Atter that he kept store and went broke, and then he tuck up with this ol' man Howard. I 'low he's gittin' mighty good pay, workin' fer him," she added.

"He draws eighty dollars a month," Calloway told her truthfully, and turned off the road toward a distant thicket.

He did not go on to Buckthorn Creek, but, sprawling on his back in the concealing thicket, set about to piece together the raw facts he had gleaned that day. Never before had his brain worked so hard, so concentrically. And never before had he realized the gigantic proportions of his father's scheme of commercial empire and the difficulties it involved.

"Poor old Pap!" he murmured, with a fuller appreciation of the grim, kindly chieftain. "He's slicker than the best of 'em at a trade, but he confidences too many people. That's why he's lost out here—and because he's crippled and can't go around to look after things himself. I reckon he does need somebody to help him take care of the business."

Another hour of thinking, and Calloway sat upright, his blue eyes glinting, his tawny hair in shaggy disorder.

"But he ain't goin' to lose out in Howard City while I have my breath!" he vowed. "This thing's clear as spring water. I'm not known here, nobody would believe who I am if I'd tell 'em now, and I can't get word to Pap in time—but I can stand up for his rights and show certain fellers that we Howards ain't the fools they make us out to be!"

The loss of a few hundred dollars more would not matter, and even Calloway, in this instance, knew the danger of impetuous action. Moreover, much of his case still rested on circumstantial evidence. It was one thing to be convinced himself, but another to convince his stubbornly loyal father and all Howard City.

"I'm goin' to hold my temper in this. Pap's right; business is done with steady brains and an easy tongue. I'm a little mad now, but I don't aim to let myself hurt anybody."

The young mountaineer waited in the thicket until dark. He knew the bucolic habits of the townsfolk, that an hour after sunset most of them would be in bed. Then the store would be closed for the day, and its manager probably alone and taking an accounting.

At that time Calloway left his hiding place and started toward the City. There were no street lights, but he soon made out a distant glow, coming from the store. That was his beacon. Getting nearer he noted that the upper floor was dimly illuminated and there was a light in the office, at the rear of the first floor.

"I'll go in the back way and talk to Frank quietlike," he planned. "I can tell him enough to make him believe who I am. Then he's got to tell me a few things."

When he reached the rear of the building, however, he saw through the open office window that the manager was not alone. Jay Tolson was with him, both in their shirt sleeves, and they were seated beside the iron safe. They, too, were trusting to the sleeping habits of the townfolk, certain that no one would be about at that hour.

Calloway, revising his plan, crept closer in the darkness until he was just beneath the window. To his right was a door, leading into the office from the back yard, but it was shut.

Frank Wilgus, at the safe, was taking out two full money bags.

"Here's yer half," Calloway heard him say, handing Tolson the bags, "with what I give ye last night and all the stuff yer brother got fer his store. I reckon ye and him will have the only business in Howard City atter a few more weeks."

Jay Tolson untied the bags and began to count the money.

"Ye reelly think ole Grant won't start up ag'in?" he asked absently.

Frank chuckled.

"Not onless I misjedge him," he answered. "He's already sick o' losin' money here; and, atter a third fire, he'll quit cold."

Jay looked up uneasily.

"Frank, I 'low ye'd better not burn down this buildin'," he protested. "Hit'll be too suspicious."

"How else kin we cover our tracks?" demanded the manager. "A few hundred dollar sent to the ole man with the word that the rest o' the stock burned will clear us this time like hit done afore. Leastwise, he won't be able to prove nothin' on us. We've been generous with Hiram and shet his mouth, and Leck ain't got sense enough to know what's happenin'. Grant'll blame this fire on the West Virginia company, too, and jest quit."

Frank hitched his chair against the roller-top desk and shrugged.

"O' course," he added, "I'm expectin' to lose my job. He can't help blamin' me with considerable keerlessness, anyway. But I'll resign when I write him. I've got plenty to live easy on ontil the time comes when I kin git rich offen them lots. This sale will fix me to buy several more."

He chuckled again and fondled his stringy mustache.

Calloway, crouching beside the window, felt his big muscles quiver and hot blood surge upward through his chest to his thick neck. He slipped off his coat and hat, and loosened the collar of his shirt, trying to cool and control himself.

"I just ain't goin' to get mad," he repeated, gritting his teeth. "I've got nothin' but my fists and feet, and they have guns in there. Besides, one man against two is perilously uneven. I—I want to be scared this once. A fightin' temper's bad for business, Pap said. I got to be scared and wait till another time.

"But—" his terrible fists clenched—"—— them ungrateful thieves! They ought to be learned a severe, bloody lesson!"

The door connecting the office with the main storeroom opened, and Hiram joined Wilgus and Tolson, wiping his perspiring face with a bandana.

"Ever'thing's ready upstairs," he reported in an audible undertone to the manager. "I've got all the empty boxes and packin' stuff thar, with several gallon o' coal-ile handy. All we'll have to do now is scatter the ile and tech a match."

He grinned meaningly.

"Ye ain't goin' to do hit tonight, air ye, Frank?" inquired Jay, still uneasy.

Frank regarded him with scornful amusement.

"Naw," he said. "We'll keep on sellin' through tomorrow and git that much more. But we've got to leave some stuff to burn, to make the ashes look right.

"Howsomever," he sneered, "yo' needn't be afeered, Jay. Ye kin go find yerself a alibi tomorrow at sundown, and I'll stay here and tech her off. Then we'll all three retire from business——"

He glanced, suddenly startled, toward the back door.

The latch had creaked as Calloway, outside, twisted the knob. Finding it locked, young Howard stepped quickly backward and lunged his shoulder against the panel. The bolt snapped and the door flew open.

"Frank Wilgus, are you the feller Grant Howard once saved from drownin'?" The question came from between white and trembling lips.

But the rest of Calloway's face was livid, his head thrust forward, his fists clenched, as he paused just over the threshold.

The manager half rose in his chair, staring. He had known the Grant Howard of three decades before.

"Y—yes," he stammered, "ye—he did save——"

Jay Tolson did not try to rise, his partly counted money on his lap, while Hiram stood gaping from the other door.

"You sneakin' copperhead!"

Calloway, in two strides, was across the room. He reached, clutched Frank's throat with his left fingers and with a swift right fist smashed his head against the desk-top. It was a stunning blow and the battler, knowing it, released the limp body and swung instinctively toward Hiram.

The burly clerk, arousing, was fumbling at his hip. Calloway uttered a furious roar and sprang. The impact of his weight threw Hiram against the wall, the pistol-hand pinioned behind him. Before he could release it, the Howard fingers closed about his throat, a powerful knee rammed his stomach, and, strike with his free fist though he did, what felt like a flint bowlder crashed into his face again and again until his senses went blank.

An oath, a sweep of air at Calloway's neck—and he dodged at the instant a chair, aimed at his head, cracked against his left shoulder.

Jay Tolson, seeing he had missed, leaped for the outer door. At its threshold an arm, muscular as a boa's coil, threw itself about his middle, tightened, and hurled him back into the room. He fell against the safe, was jerked erect, screaming, grabbing at the madman who made him his toy; then was lifted and catapulted headfirst at the window.

Neither glass nor sash hindered his flight and splinters of both went with him out into the yard.

Calloway turned, picked up the unconscious Wilgus and dumped him through the window to join his partner. Hiram, after being searched for his pistol, followed, adding his inert bulk to the human pile.

In neighboring houses lights began to show, and there was the sound of approaching hurried footsteps and voices.

Young Howard, standing in the middle of the wrecked room, looked about, stretched his arms to their full length, heaved a deep breath and grinned through his bruises and blood. Then he placed a chair at the desk and sat himself solidly down, proprietor by right of birth and conquest.

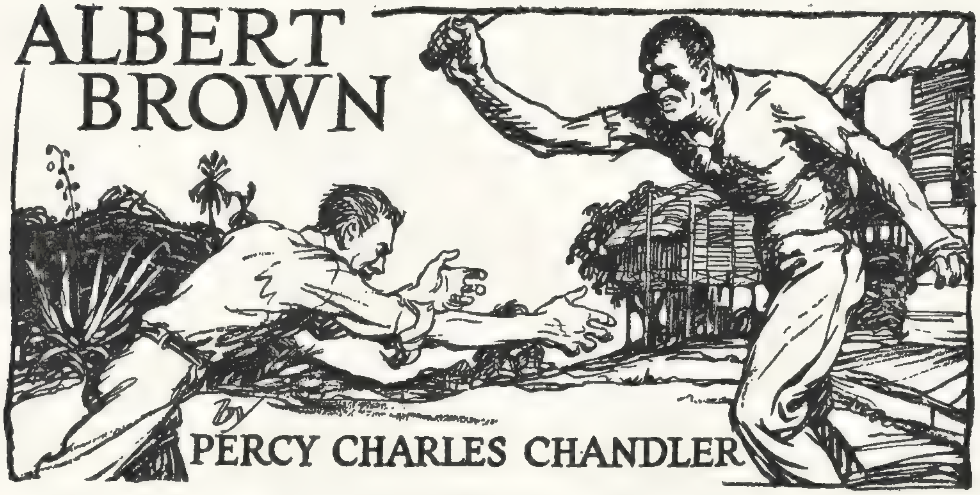
A FEW days later a mountain boy, wearing a red-banded straw hat and a large-checked suit, hitched his mule outside Grant Howard's office and, entering, handed him a penciled letter. The old chieftain read:

Dear Pap,

I've quit fishing and took charge of your business here at the city. Please send me some new goods, a few of my clothes and a honest lawyer. I want him to help me get some building lots that your money bought. Your son, Cal.

P. S. The boy who fetches you this is called Leck — I'm keeping him. He hasn't got much sense, but he can tell you the latest news of this place and where to find some books of mine I want. Trade will be slack here for a spell and I allow to do some studying.

P. S. again. I'm enclosing a doctor's bill we've got to pay. Frank and Hiram and Jay aren't dead but they'll be mighty feeble for several weeks yet. I was sorry to have to hurt them, Pap; honest, I aimed to hold my temper and speak gentle with them later—but, Pap, there's times when business talking has to be done with fists. Some fellows haven't ears for nothing else. And Frank and Hiram and Jay they heard me, I reckon. Good-by.



ALBERT BROWN

by PERCY CHARLES CHANDLER

Author of "The Cableman."

ALBERT EDWARD BROWN, named for an English king, was distinctly a product of the war. Albert was pure, unadulterated cockney from the heart and center of Cockaigne—Wapping Stairs. Yet there was nothing of the beer-soaked brutality, the incipience of footpad criminality about Albert that one usually associates with the slums and the shabby sin that are London, East.

The approach of dangerous young manhood had seen Albert snapped up by the war, which was about the best thing that could have happened to him at that age—in the purlieus of the Shadwell Basin. The same war had taught him a "trade." For Albert had been detailed for transport duties, in the course of which he learned many useful things appertaining to the management of mules and motor cars.

Other things happened to him. He developed muscles and a brisket that were the secret envy of his section, and the pallor of London quite disappeared in the raw, wet winds of Flanders and the sun of many unwarlike months of a Macedonian summer.

All that was over, and the discharged soldier found—along with very many other good soldiers—that a country avid after his manhood in wartime was capable of becoming collectively and most strangely noncommittal about trying to provide him with the employment necessary to keep that manhood to the point of bare existence in the time of peace. To Albert the old surroundings seemed unaccountably changed, unbearably stale after the glorious years of war; and Wapping Stairs was positively malodorous. Funny he hadn't noticed it before.

A strange, humble yearning after economical betterment possessed him. The outer world, that he had seen a little of, beckoned imperiously. And the very docks on which he walked gave him the chance to escape all this bitterness, all the despondency engendered of the unavailing search for work ashore.

ALBERT BROWN had allowed himself to get disgraciously drunk, and his ship had sailed without him. Not that he was a habitually vicious drinker; he merely followed the customs of his class. Guayaquil is not a propitious port for the sailor to be stranded in. The consul had been dismally diffident about the matter of providing Albert with another ship. He made it plain that he had no time to attend to drunken sailormen. With a curt gesture of dismissal toward the door he suggested that Albert might find work at the nebulous destination of the oilfields.

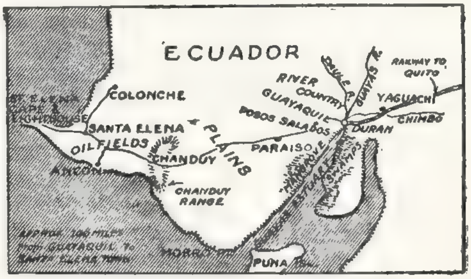
Because of the rains Guayaquil seemed doubly hopeless to the forlorn sailor. He did not know that it was worse than hopeless, that it is literally deadly during the rains—the most pestiferous spot in all the South Pacific. Business was at a standstill. Not a vessel was loading or unloading on all the miserable vista of the rainswept, turbid Guayas.

Ashore, some shivering negroes were stacking sacks of cocoa in the warehouses of the Malecon; but white men do not stevedore with colored men in the tropics. The inhabitants of Guayaquil failed lamentably to understand Albert's English. They were obviously quite indifferent to his pleas for work and appeared as if overcome by the lethargy induced by the appalling humidity of their city. Chiefly because he felt that he was about to become a burden on the good people of Guayaquil, Albert inquired the way to the oilfields. Anything was better than walking about in the muddy streets where little livid-faced men glanced at him with cynical curiosity, or roared with laughter, as at some huge joke, when he asked for work.

How was the unsophisticated Albert to know that he was regarded as just one more *gringo* tramp? When, after two days of unavailing trying, the realization did come to him, it came as a terrible shock. He had always earned his own living honestly as far back as he could remember—from selling papers in the Commercial Road as a kid right up to his last job, sweating on the stokehold plates of the *Castlegarth*. He would sooner die than be taken for a tramp.

As far as a good-natured, easy-going man may be moved to anger Albert became angry. Which explains why Albert Brown strode out through the pouring rain like a soldier. Shook the mud of Guayaquil in clods from his shoes, marched over the long wooden bridge that spans the Salado—the bridge that divides as cleanly as a line the civilization of the city from the utter loneliness of the wilderness—and out into the waste that is the western province of Guayas.

He slept that night at the dripping shack of a climate-stricken charcoal burner beyond Posos Salados. Followed another day of foot-slogging through mud, of bitterness and disillusionment. Through a country indescribably desolate, with not a soul, a shack or sign of tillage to relieve the monotony of the vista. In the early afternoon it seemed to Albert that he had left the rains behind. A few hours later he made the top of the rise that looks down on the little village of Paraiso.



Trees encompass the village prettily about and, to the weary man, the place appeared a very haven of rest. A small inn, or *fonda*, stands at the right hand as one enters Paraiso from the east; an insignificant two-story shack with a narrow veranda facing the street. The *fonda* does not even boast a signboard. There were two tables on the veranda, with rough wooden benches for seats; but Albert would have passed the place by had he not noticed an age-worn beer sign on the half-open door.

The tired walker sank wearily on a bench, laying his coat on the table before him. He felt most awfully soggy. The village seemed deserted except for a small group of Indians in uncouth bagginess of thin cotton shirts and trousers lounging in squat postures about the little store directly across the plaza from the inn. The plaza itself was merely a broadening of the same road that Albert had traveled, the *terraplen*, or main road leading westward from Guayaquil to the coast and the farther northwest confines of the province of Guayas.

The rest of the village consisted of about thirty of the huts typical of all that countryside, flimsy structures of split cane raised on slight but strong poles of the guayacan hardwood about ten feet from the ground. Even the floors are of split cane that bend beneath the weight as one moves about. The *fonda*, however, had evidently been built by people with a style of architecture superior to that of the simple, Christian Indians of the plains, for it was built throughout of wood and boasted rough doors and windows.

Albert had been soaking in rain and squelching through mud for two days, and he had reached such a surpassing state of misery that he did not realize how thoroughly wet he was. And he was sick—very sick—and did not know that, either. He became seized with an overmastering desire for a draught, for several draughts of strong liquor. He began to feel most desperately cold and could not understand why this should be so, for the late afternoon sun still shone blindingly on the tawny dust of the little plaza.

A tall man of the Ecuadorian negroid type appeared from the interior of the *fonda*. He carried a bottle of *aguardiente* and two glasses. His color was brown like coffee, so that his crisp, unshaven beard showed black against the bony salients of his jowl. His clothes of cheap cotton cloth that had once been white were incredibly dirty, and he gave off a pungent odor of stale sweat. The negro smiled affably at his visitor, and introduced himself with great volubility and flashing of white teeth as Mr. Eleuterio Ramos.

Mr. Ramos was quick to see what Albert required, setting the bottle and a glass down before this latest guest of the *fonda*. The stricken man lost no time in pouring about half a tumbler of the poisonous liquid and swallowing it like so much water. Pausing only to collect his breath, he disposed of another and yet larger drink. He became seized with the belief that he could, perhaps, dry up the humidity that seemed to permeate his frame by means of this fiercely burning stuff; and he filled the glass to the brim, gulping and choking it down.

Mr. Ramos regarded all this with a wondering gaze of unfeigned approval; but as if suddenly recalling that the honor of Paraiso was at stake he politely but firmly took charge of the bottle and within the space of a minute disposed of three drinks at least equal to those that Albert had taken. This feat accomplished, the bottle was once more placed at Albert's disposal, after which the negro sat down at the adjoining table.

He faced Albert, spreading out his hands in an affectation of apology, shrugging his shoulders and smiling in a deprecatory way, as if contemptuous about such a small matter. As the powerful alcohol mounted to the negro's head the smile spread into a broad grimace of beatific content which he bestowed on Albert as from a lofty distance—Mr. Ramos' profound comprehension of the appreciation of two men for the worth of good liquor. It was as if he were musing:

"Well, that was merely an eye-opener; we both know that perfectly well; it is now your turn. Proceed."

But Albert Brown was preoccupied with the first qualms of a very sick stomach. The incipience of malaria had gripped him in a devilish clutch. The world swam before his eyes, and he was entirely unable to detect the sardonic leer beneath the negro's mask of affected affability. An imminence of vomiting seized him, and with all other desires evanescent before this one imperious necessity he rose and lurched heavily from the *fonda* into the convenient obscurity of the foliage-darkened roadside.

He returned to the *fonda* to find Mr. Ramos and a middle-aged white woman engaged in some sort of argument. It seemed the two were disputing possession of Albert's coat, which he had left on the table. As the cockney took charge of the coat a terrible weakness came over his limbs. He fell, the floor appearing to rise at him, striking him an excruciatingly painful blow on the nose. With a groan of hopeless anguish he spread a swooning length on the boards of the little veranda.

* * *

WHEN Albert awoke he found himself lying in a low and narrow but unbelievably comfortable bed. He turned to lean on an elbow, but desisted because of the pains that forthwith gripped him from feet to shoulders. On a rawhide-bottomed chair at the bedside lay the clothes that somebody had divested him of. In spite of the pain of moving he reached for them, discovering to his intense surprize that his little money, and certain medals and papers more precious than any money, were intact.

A door opened, and the woman he had seen arguing with the negro came into the room followed by a girl of about seventeen years. Albert succeeded by manifold signs in discovering that he had been very sick for more than a week. He had been unconscious and delirious. It would be necessary for him to remain in bed for at least another week.

No, there was no doctor in that village. There was no doctor nearer than Guayaquil.

Then who had attended to him?

The woman replied that she and her daughter had done everything they could for the señor; she hoped there was nothing else he required? Being a gentleman, Albert immediately reached for his soggy roll of *sucre* bills, and endeavored to press it on the woman. She refused to take the money. The cockney was touched.

"Orl right, mother—w'en I get well," he found himself saying, and it seemed that the woman understood. "And 'oo wos it tuk me clo'se orf?" he queried suddenly, pointing to the mud-caked garments.

The woman and the girl immediately began to laugh in most unseemly fashion. Plainly these females knew something about the—disrobing. Albert was visibly offended, but only for a moment. He smiled. The matter of his outraged chastity could be postponed. He began to laugh. The weak cackle that came from his throat frightened him. The woman noticed it also. She left the room, returning in a few minutes with a succulent dish of chicken cooked with rice and flavored with hot peppers—*arroz aguada*—the national dish of the lowlands of Ecuador.

The girl watched the sick man as he ate, a large sympathy in her eyes. She was a nice, clean-looking girl, thought Albert appraisingly, even in her ugly buttoned boots and shapeless cotton print dress. Not quite what he would have termed "clarsy" in his own peculiar idiom; "clarsy" being largely a matter of smart clothes; but certainly "a bit of orl right." Which phrase in the mouth of the cockney does not necessarily imply the vulgarity that it would seem to, but denotes something better and finer; a quality of critical approval passing ordinary respect and verging on honest admiration.

She was a pretty girl; pretty with the attractiveness of small, regular features, of patent good health, of a demure and unaffected presence. Abounding health was manifest in her large, lustrous eyes of indeterminate opacity, in the transparent clearness of her olive complexion, in smooth and well-rounded arms, sun-tanned and usefully strong, but chiefly by the glorious bloom of her happy, surging youth.

The slightest dimpling of small muscles at the base of the compact, white throat gave out the hint of a suppleness and strength that even the unshapely dress could not quite hide; and her whole appearance was such as might be expected in a dutiful mother's daughter not unacquainted with the modest labor of the wash-tub. Her abundant hair hung loose and glossy almost to her waist, making her appear younger than she really was.

A brilliant thought dawned on Albert, deciding him in terminating a silence that was growing embarrassing.

"Wot's yer nime?" he queried abruptly. "Nime—*nom*—*nom*——"

He trailed off into the indecision of his linguistic limitations.

"*Ah, nombre!*" exclaimed the girl delightedly, excited at this sudden access of understanding. "*Pues — Alicia — Alicia Velasquez.*"

She pointed at her mother.

"*Mi madre,*" she said simply. "*Mi madre, Viuda de Velasquez.*"

"W'y, o' course, I savvies yer perfeckly," replied the quick-witted Albert. "You're Alice and the lydy's yer mother, the Widder Velasquez."

The girl smiled. She was a good-natured girl, this Alice Velasquez, quite evidently pleased to be of any service to the alien invalid.

"Nah then, tell us," continued Albert as if by mere afterthought, "tell us, 'oo might 'is dark royal 'ighness be—dark gent—savvy, negro?"

Alicia savvied negro, and a look of intense disgust spread over her pretty face. She carefully removed the clothes from the chair, seating herself at the bedside. With an air half-frightened, half-secretive she whispered certain cryptic sentences into the very receptive ear of Albert Brown.

"*Hombre malo, muy malo,*" commenced the girl, and to be frank these were the only words that Albert properly understood.

From certain other disclosures which he failed to comprehend in all their fullness of detail, but from which he was able to apprehend a meaning, more by reason of the rapt, fearful manner of the telling than from full understanding of the spoken words, it became evident that a grave trouble menaced the simple order of the house of Velasquez—and that Mr. Eleuterio Ramos was at the bottom of the trouble.

AFTER another week in bed Albert descended to sun himself in convalescence on the little veranda. He had not seen Mr. Ramos since the day of his arrival. His sickness had been malaria: The high temperature fever resultant upon the soaking undergone on the long walk from Guayaquil. There were no elements of contagion in the attack, and recovery was rapid.

But his first attempt at walking was sufficient to convince Albert that he was just a little too weak to tackle Mr. Ramos at present. He surmised reluctantly that he would have to nurse himself a bit. Would have to get into form, so to speak, before staging the grand showdown. There was no vacillation about the cockney. He had come to a definite decision. During the days that followed he heard other things about Mr. Ramos. Things that confirmed him in his resolve. He believed that it was up to him to relieve the good Mrs. Velasquez of the presence of the odious usurper who had stalked into her humble life. Not forgetting Miss Alicia.

Mr. Ramos took his meals with the widow and her daughter in the little kitchen. As Albert had perforce to eat at the same table he was compelled to listen to the negro. He restrained himself from open rupture with the *sambo* only by affecting complete ignorance of the language, a pretense that enabled him to ignore all attempts made by that person to start conversation. For Mr. Ramos was very affable, as parasites are apt to be when the world wags to their liking.

In reality Albert was making wonderful progress with the Spanish language. Partly by the sign language learned in Thrace and Macedonia—which with insignificant exceptions is of a kinship to the sign language of the Latins—but chiefly by reason of the determination of two very intelligent young people to understand each other, Albert and Alicia were able to hold quite long conversations.

It appeared from the evidence that Mr. Eleuterio Ramos was not merely a common tramp and a filthy parasite but also a criminal; a most felonious and a thoroughly facinorous fellow. He was from another part of Ecuador, the river country of the basin of the Guayas and its tributary streams. The people of the river country are as precocious, lazy and quarrelsome as the people of the plains of western Guayas are the exact opposite—ignorant, hard-working and good-natured. The plainsmen are of almost pure Indian stock, but nobody knows the ancestry of the river folk.

Mr. Ramos had appeared in Paraiso about two months previous to the arrival of Albert. The Indians had shut their doors, or rather, drawn up their ladders, on him, as they invariably do on all strangers of doubtful antecedents. He was a *sambo*—the name generally applied to all negroid types in Ecuador—and therefore and necessarily a bad man. The *sambo* had pleaded hunger and willingness to work; so the kind-hearted Mrs. Velasquez had provided him with food and shelter.

She had not been altogether surprized that his expressed willingness to work should have failed to materialize before the frequent appeasing of his hunger; but what was worrying her now was the fact that she was unable to get rid of the man. All he did was loaf, eat, sleep and drink. He carried a machete worn like a sword in a leather scabbard at his belt and when in his cups boasted loudly to all and sundry that he had killed a man with it.

Mrs. Velasquez had had the temerity, about six weeks before, to tell Mr. Ramos to move on. His reply had been to force that good lady into a chair, while he sat at the other side of the little kitchen table, telling her what a very bad man he was, threatening her with unnamable penalties if she ever dared to mention the subject again. He had stated with vehemence that he intended to stay in her house just as long as it pleased him to; in fact, he was seriously meditating settling down there for life.

He had killed a man in Chobo! Was the widow Velasquez aware of that? No? Ah, well, it made no difference, because it was true, quite true. And he would kill anybody else who sought to oppose him. A woman—even a widow—just as readily as any man!

Both Mrs. Velasquez and Alicia were terrified. It seemed they were never to get rid of their unwelcome visitor. Albert hotly demanded to know where the police were; were there no authorities of any kind to free two inoffensive women from the outrage of this man's presence in that house? Mrs. Velasquez laughed hysterically at the bare idea of the magnificent police bestirring themselves over her preoccupations. Besides, there were no police nearer than Guayaquil. The village boasted no *jefe politico*, no person in authority; and the priest who might have helped them visited the place only twice a year. As for the Indians—they were more scared of the intruder than Mrs. Velasquez was. They said it served her right for giving hospitality to a *sambo*.

Latterly Mr. Ramos had been getting more offensive than ever, and he had actually dared to ask Mrs. Velasquez for her daughter's hand in formal marriage. It was no longer safe for the girl to be out of her mother's sight. And in their own house, too.

The blood of Albert Brown boiled with the access of indignation that this news produced. And the thought came to the cockney, as such thoughts come to men with the imaginative or superstitious faculties highly developed, that he had been sent to that village for the precise purpose of delivering these two simple people from the domination, the terrorism, of this oppressor.

Albert could not work hard enough to discharge his obligation to the widow Velasquez. With a sinking feeling in the region of the pocket where he kept his small roll of *sucre* bills he felt sure the eventual reckoning would find him lacking the wherewithal to pay his bill. He became a veritable Gideon, a Trojan in his labors; chopping wood, carrying water, waiting on the transient passengers, anything he could turn his hand to. The Indians of the village rarely came near the little *fonda*, and free *aguardiente* would not have drawn them there now that the *sambo* had intruded his baleful presence into the place.

If it had not been for passing automobiles Mrs. Velasquez would have fared badly. When the cars slowed down before the *fonda* Albert was always the first on the scene to open the door, to fetch water for the radiator, to do anything that anybody—black, white or yellow—asked of him. And finally, the meal served, to insert himself between the guests and Mr. Ramos in order to prevent that avaricious fellow from appropriating the payment for the feast.

So efficient did Albert become in this particular that Mr. Ramos grew morose and even rude about it; while Mrs. Velasquez grew correspondingly happy and rich. Many a time did the negro's hand steal to the handle of his machete; this unwarranted interference in his supply of pocket money stirred him to the core. But the *sambo* was a coward except when drunk and, instead of taking action, he would hide himself away—with a bottle of the widow's best *refinado*—to meditate savagely on the manner of the eventual killing, as is the custom of his kind.

On the fourth day of Albert's convalescence a party of three Americans arrived at the *fonda* on their way from Guayaquil to the oilfields. The cockney's excitement was pathetic. At last—to speak to some one in his own language; and possibly, to clinch a job!

Would they—did they—could they give him—that is, put him in the way of getting a job? Any kind of a job; chauffeur, cook, handy man, anything? He could drive a car. Yuss, and tyke the —— thing ter pieces and put it tergether agyne if necessary.

The Americans found the cockney amusing, but were noncommittal about jobs. The youngest of the party was a smiling, heavily built physical giant of about thirty whose thin cashmere suit bulged over his muscles and creased and threatened to burst at each movement of his virile frame. The second was a quiet, middle-aged man of scholarly and contemplative mien. The third was an elderly but active man whom the other two treated with deference, as if he were one in authority. The latter bent a look of undisguised suspicion at Albert. He said no word, but his look said volumes.

"Tykes me fer a —— tramp, that one does," moaned the cockney to the troubled refuge of his outraged soul.

That particular man was the one Albert had counted on. He was undoubtedly the most important personage of this party. A wealthy man from all appearances, and a man of managerial capacities, of governing qualifications.

Mr. Ramos had been drinking heavily that morning. He had hidden himself away at first, but scenting possibilities of collecting some money with the arrival of the Americans, he saw fit to project his presence onto the veranda at this moment. He scowled evilly at Albert as he betook himself to the adjoining table. There he spread himself in cross-legged state, regarding the visitors with an air of lofty detachment.

At intervals he became discursive about nothing in particular, telling the bitterness that consumed him to the company and the countryside in a veritable abandon of impartiality, interspersed with sudden peals of raucous laughter, interjected with sudden spasms of questioning directed at his bleary-eyed self. Finding that no notice was taken of him he began to raise his voice. His declamatory processes reached such a degree of vehemence that the guests were interrupted at their conversation. The elderly man became very annoyed.

"Who the —— is that?" he exclaimed angrily, "tell him to go away."

Albert turned a glaring eye on Mr. Ramos.

"You 'ear that, you good-for-nothing sponger?" he shouted explosively.

"Go aw'y from 'ere!"

The guests burst into simultaneous laughter.

"He doesn't understand you, you poor little cockney," explained the young man not unkindly.

But Albert did not take it kindly.

"Pore little cockney, am I?" he queried truculently.

Being about to say more he recollected that the least said the soonest mended—especially when looking for a job. He compromised with his pride by directing his wrath at the *sambo*. He would show these strangers that a cockney was a person to be respected at times—and—he might as well stage the showdown now as later. He advanced menacingly upon the doddering author of his discomfiture.

"Get the —— aht of 'ere, you —— nigger," he shouted. "You —— sponging ——."

What Albert said does not really matter. Mighty men of valor are usually depicted as being of the proverbially strong and silent type. Albert's imprecatory attainments were merely an acquisition; something inevitable in and inseparable from "little street-bred people."

The glib speech, the profane sarcasm of the cockney constitute a sort of second line of defense for him; a device wherewith to obviate unnecessary hard knocks in a lifetime full of hard knocks; a brief retreat from the exhaustion of physical combat wherein adversaries may measure the depth of their wit instead of the strength of their arms; the futile lull of puffing execration in the perpetually tossing storm of the fight for existence—and, very often, the calm before the storm.

The cockney's wordiness was merely an ugly growth on an otherwise sound stem. His personal courage was a thing apart; something too fundamental to be affected by usage, by acquired custom. Mr. Ramos regarded Albert incredulously for a second; then he smiled; a fatuous, leering smile.

"Doncher larf at me, yer bliter," roared the cockney. "Yer been foolin' this pore widder woman long enough. Nah—aht yer goes!"

Albert was thoroughly aroused. Mrs. Velasquez and Alicia appeared on the veranda, but the cockney thrust them firmly back. The Americans stood up in order to get a better view of the impending fight; or possibly it was because they knew more about the rapidly acting treachery of the *sambo* breed than Albert did.

"Look out for his machete," shouted the younger of the three with warning emphasis.

"I'll tyke it orf 'im an' stick it in 'is blarsted guts," angrily returned Albert.

Suiting the action to his words, he sprang at the *sambo*. His hands closed round the bare brown throat so swiftly that Mr. Ramos seemed hardly aware of the contact. The grin still flickered on his face as the cockney, lifting and dragging his man by main force, threw him off the low stoop into the road. Mr. Ramos rose unsteadily to his feet. His grin had quite disappeared, and a light of terrible hate blazed from his bloodshot eyes.

AMONG the Latin races it is considered a very serious thing to attack a man with the hands. In the more backward republics, where peonage of the most degrading order is still rife, it is ordained that the peon may be chastised with a stick or whip without his being allowed recourse to law. And it is a fact that the peon will take his beating with a stick and count it no more than part of the day's work. But strike him with the hands—and you have inflicted upon him the stigma of your personal malice; life thereafter loses all attraction for him until the insult is wiped out in blood.

Mr. Ramos now had in process of absorption into his system the sufficiency of alcohol requisite to render him a very dangerous customer indeed to tackle. He swayed to and fro with the convulsive burnings of his own passion, muttering to himself the while. Albert stood before him. He did not in the least like the look on the negro's face, but he had started out to do something, and he intended to see it through. The presence of the usurper should never again be permitted to darken the portals of the hospitable House of Velasquez.

There the two men stood in one brief instant of magnificent contrast; the passion-swayed African and the cold white man; the lithe tiger terribly pregnant with possibilities of phenomenal leapings, and the stocky, muscular mastiff constitutionally averse to the vanity of leapings, but taut-limbed, stout-hearted and strong with the instinct to hang on, to endure, to fight to the bitterest of all ends if the need demanded. One brief moment—and with a shout of awful hate, a babble of frothing blasphemy, the tiger leaped.

In his sinewy right arm he held aloft that other arm, that white arm of cold steel that strikes dismay to the stoutest heart. In the bright sunlight it shone like a brand of strange white fire. The horrified Albert saw the glinting line of steel turn in air and flash with sidelong pass. His heart seemed to turn to water within him. He closed his eyes, and on that fraction of time a sudden instinct of self-preservation galvanized him into action. He ducked and fell, like a tackling back at Rugby, and straight for the legs of his enemy.

Ungovernable madness of fury and not a little fear surged within him, radiated from him like a trembling palsy; the blent emotions of blind hatred and indeterminate panic-fright.

Albert had been ready for a fight, but had not expected this. How was a poor law-abiding, police-ridden, sergeant-bossed wight from civilization to be expected to cope with this exhibition of primitive savagery—this darkest deed of a springheeled jack from darkest Africa? It wasn't fair—and after the war, too.

And with the manner of his race when meeting unexpectedly with things that are not fair, with the fighting will inherited from Heaven knows what heroic Celt or uncompromising Saxon ancestors, his indignation blazed into a veritable fury of fighting courage. Grimly he fought as the two rolled over under the impact of his dive at the *sambo's* legs. Dourly, blindly he strove to reach the arm that held the blade. He felt his enemy's body sinewy, surprizingly lithe and alive under his arms. Over and over they rolled in the dusty plaza, a frantically animated mass under their double straining and striving.

Albert heard a hysterical shrieking, and even in his preoccupation found time to wonder if it was Alicia who shrieked. Undoubtedly the *sambo* meant murder, horrible and bloody murder. He came of a breed that thinks nothing of killing its kind, of a race that regards the killing for revenge as the height, the culmination of all desirable things.

The cockney kept close to his man with the desperation born of terrible necessity. One of the Americans ran to the car, shouting that he was coming with a gun, but Albert waved him back. He had succeeded in grasping the wrist that held the machete and had seated himself astride his opponent's chest. He picked up a large stone and banged cruelly at the fingers grasping the weapon. The hand opened, and Albert secured the blade, tossing it far away.

The elderly man of managerial port ran down from the *fonda* and took grateful charge of it. He was a man averse to bloodshed, and the machete is sudden death in the capable hands of the *sambo*.

Albert stood up, inviting his opponent to do likewise. Ramos obeyed sulkily, whereupon he was promptly knocked down. The invitation to stand up followed by the knocking down process was repeated several times. A peculiarly Nordic process, and one quite foreign to Mr. Ramos' philosophy of mortal combat. One felt almost sorry for the *sambo*. He was like a fish out of water without his machete. The Americans formed a ring, dancing about in most unseemly glee, pathetically beseeching Albert to provide still further fistic exemplars.

"Put up yer dooks," ordered Albert. "Put up yer dooks, yer blarsted 'eathen."

Mr. Ramos put them up, and was rewarded with a crack on the jaw that threw him down yet again. He showed reluctance to stand up thereafter. Out of the corner of a crafty eye he measured the distance between himself and a large piece of wood on the ground. It was a short length of guayacan pole, the hardwood of the tropics, almost as hard and heavy as iron.

With a sudden rush he succeeded in gaining possession of this new-found weapon, and before Albert could divine his intentions, before the excited onlookers could intervene, he brought it down with tremendous force on his adversary's bare head. A second blow, and Albert sank senseless to his knees.

Mr. Ramos left Paraiso after thus delivering himself from the fistic persecution of Mr. Brown. He left hurriedly and at the double, for at least three men of the same racial peculiarities as Mr. Brown—peculiarities that include the barring of hardwood clubs from fist fights—became seized with the simultaneous desire to do him grievous bodily harm. Strangely enough, the middle-aged man of contemplative mien was the leader of this infuriated army; but then scholarly men sometimes have intensely legal minds. The *sambo*, however, was able to run faster, and he was allowed to depart, a dilapidated object, in the direction of Guayaquil.

Albert was in parlous case, his face pathetic with the profound coma of a seemingly deep sleep. The heavily built young man gathered him up, carrying him into the *fonda* as if he were a baby. He was put to bed. An ugly gash had cut through hair and scalp, and a hard knob the size of a pigeon's egg had already formed on his forehead. Alicia and her mother brought towels and water. The man of managerial capacities while unfastening the cockney's belt discovered something that appeared to interest him considerably.

"Why, I thought he was just another hobo," said he with feeling; "but look here, fellows, see what I've found."

The fellows saw, as the speaker held out for their inspection, four silver medals.

"Went through it all right, all right," observed the scholarly man with quite unscholarly emphasis.

But the heavily built young man said nothing. He was busy inspecting a certain well-known medal awarded to all the soldiers of the allied armies, and for a very good reason—he possessed an identical one himself. This young man, whose name was John Mortimer, began to evince a new-found interest in the unconscious man.

Certain of Albert's papers came to light in quite unlawful manner. One of these documents set forth that Corporal Albert Edward Brown had been honorably discharged from the British Army at the expiration of four years of meritorious service; a document magnanimously unblemished by the report of a single jag. The papers and medals were carefully replaced. The elderly man, whose name was Benedict Williamson, appeared lost in thought. Suddenly Mr. Williamson spoke.

"Mortimer, weren't you telling me you needed a real good chauffeur?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed," replied Mortimer emphatically. "Man I have is a native—drives like blazes—but when it comes to repairs he's just plumb useless. He stuck me in the desert east of Colonche last week for a broken wire, and——"

"Well," interrupted Mr. Williamson, "what d'ye say to Mr.—Corporal Brown?"

Mortimer opined that Corporal Brown was a live one, and said so.

"He is elected if you leave it to me, sir," said he with decision.

Whether by coincidence, or because of some telepathic, subtle communication from the drumming fairies of a head-aching subconsciousness, the subject of these solicitations opened his eyes at this point.

"And wot is Mister Brown elected to, may 'e arsk?" he queried feebly. "I thort it was a golden 'arp."

"Oh, just that job you were asking about, Mr. Brown," replied the smiling Mortimer. "You can start work as soon as you feel fit enough. One hundred and fifty dollars—American dollars—per month, and all found. Three months leave after three years, and passage paid—pay while on leave."

He paused.

"Oh—job is driving a car, Mr. Brown," he added as if by superfluous afterthought, and smiled sheepishly at Williamson for having forgotten this important detail.

He introduced himself as the manager of the Compania Petrolera Ecuatoriana. And concluded by introducing the elderly man as Mr. Benedict Williamson, president of the company, and of a dozen other companies besides. Mr. Benedict Williamson, the millionaire financier! Even the unlettered Albert had heard the name. He was in good company.

"So you see you are employed on unimpeachable authority," broke in the scholarly man, who was a famous geologist, and answered to the name of Septimus Dimmock.

The three turned to go with curt, friendly words of farewell, but Albert called Mr. Mortimer back.

With a pathetically eager smile he questioned the young manager.

"Blimey, guv'nor, is it true?" he asked wistfully. "The job—w'y, I never 'ad a real job before in my life. No foolin'—is it all Sir Garnett, or am I cold and dreamin'?"

Mortimer covered his emotion by laughing heartily.

"Why, surely it's true, Mr. Brown, you can rely on me," he answered. "Soon as you feel fit, pack on board the first car heading for Santa Elena. Charge it up to the company."

A sudden thought struck him. Probably his future chauffeur was out of funds. He produced a wallet, counting out five blue-colored bills. Well, he had paid more money than that to see worse fights!

"Your pay starts now, Mr. Brown—here's a hundred *sucres* on account—shove 'em under the pillow so you'll know you're not dreaming the next time you wake up."

He hurried away with words of laughing encouragement—but the encouragement of the longed-for job nearly made Albert a well man then and there. He heard the stairs rattling beneath Mortimer's athletic weight as that breezy person descended.

He stared before him like a man in a dream, and his gaze fell upon the notes in his hands. Each one was marked with '20's and strange Spanish words. Clean and new and blue they were, not like those greasy, torn-in-half-and-pasted-together bills in his pocket. These were the sign of his new job, of the cleaner, better life before him. The steady job that he had longed for, sought for, fought for in vain in the hopeless desperation engendered of the worklessness of the old land beyond the seas.

So these were the Yanks. They were the first Albert had ever met with this degree of intimacy. He began to feel a strange emotion of liking for them. And not merely because of the job. Unfortunately, the cockney held the untraveled European's usually distorted views about America and the Americans. The distortions, the exaggerations of the films and florid newspapers, of cowboys and criminals, pioneers and philanderers, millionaires and well-massaged mimes all inextricably mixed up against a background of skyscrapers, boundless prairies and Great White Ways.

The perspective was getting clearer now. These men, Williamson, Dimmock and Mortimer, represented the real Americans, of course; the other sort just couldn't possibly count in a nation of such breezy fellows. And they paid in advance! Well, by all the tenets of fair dealing that he knew, he would show himself worthy of their confidence. Which resolution, in a man of Albert's caliber, demonstrates that Mr. Benedict Williamson was not such a bad judge of men when it came to personally selecting his company's employees—for however humble the post.

ALBERT BROWN—shuffer *hand* mechanic, hif you please—driver at large over the dry, pleasant plains of western Guayas, has never yet stuck the genial Mr. Mortimer in the desert, though he may be observed automatically stopping at the *fonda-oasis* of Paraiso with a regularity that is remarkable. And sometimes he takes little trips there on his own account—if with the company's car and gasoline. But gasoline is dirt cheap, anyway, in the oil country. And the reason for these frequent visits—this fondness for the *fonda*, so to speak?

A matter only concerning Mr. Albert Brown—and the Señorita Alicia Velasquez.

The BLACK THIEF

A Complete Novelette

by ARTHUR GILCHRIST BRODEUR

Author of "Judgment by Steel," "The King's Choice," etc.

"AUCH is a noble city, fair sir, with seven inns; but in none of them will you taste such wine as this!"

The fat taverner filled his guest's cup for the third time, abating no whit of the almost holy pride with which he had first brought forth the bottle, caressing it with reverent affection.

" 'Twas pressed in the year of divine mercy 1132—twenty years gone!" he sighed. "Even so great a lord as yourself has never set lip to better. 'Tis called the 'Marguerite,' after the Demoiselle Marguerite de Belle Gard, who was born in the same season. Poor lady!"

He fell silent, hand pressed to lips, and glanced quickly over his shoulder.

The patron of the Sun of Paradise shoved aside his empty platter, surprizing his host with swift, shrewd eyes.

"Why 'poor lady,' good master Girault? 'Tis indeed wine for an emperor's palate, and she should be held fortunate to be made famous by such a vintage."

The taverner shook his head, his honest face turned furtive.

"You ride hence tomorrow, my Lord, and in armor. 'Tis a tale you may hear without peril, but a deadly one for me to tell. I may lose house and life if you learn it from me, and repeat it in this land of Fezensac."

The guest smiled; Girault was so anxious to speak, and yet so much afraid. Never had a more garrulous man been born, nor one so fond of a good listener. Strong must be the dread that sealed his lips, seeing that since the guest's arrival the innkeeper had kept him constant company, entertaining him most freely with tale on tale of the brave deeds and desperate loves of Gascony.

"I am no less eager to hear than you to tell, good host," the guest encouraged. "Come now! We are alone. On the honor of a man who has never broken faith, I will not betray your confidence."

Girault turned and met the stranger's glance. He gazed long into the smooth, handsome features—almost womanish, save for the stern set of the mouth—searching his guest's blue-green eyes. Heaven had made Girault loose-tongued as it had made him true-hearted; and despite his terror, he knew he would tell this bold-faced lord the tale that burned on his lips, if only he might find honesty in those strange, glowing eyes.

"I know not your name," he faltered. "How know I your word is good?"

The guest stiffened.

"That question would have brought death to one of better birth," he answered softly. "Yet you do well to ask. I am a Gascon like yourself, born in this very Fezensac, not far from Auch. My name is Cercamon; I am no noble, but a troubadour. If you have heard of me, you know what my word is worth."

The effect on the taverner was magical. He dropped on his knees, clasping both hands, his ruddy face kindling with pride and joy.

"O glorious name!" he cried. "O name

renowned for song and chivalry! Blessed be Heaven, that hath brought one so famous to my house! Who in Fezensac, who in all Aquitaine, has not heard——"

He broke off, suspicion blotting the ecstacy from his eyes.

"What proof have I that you are Cercamon, the illustrious troubadour? Would Cercamon set foot in this land, which belongs to the Duchess of Aquitaine? All the world knows that her lands are forbidden to Cercamon, her garrisons under command to seize him wherever found. Nay—were you Cercamon, you had not dared come hither!"

The stranger tossed his long locks back and laughed.

"Do you hear no news in Auch, then? The Duchess Alienor truly set a price upon my head, years ago, for some hard words I said of her; but now she has given me a free pardon, having lately married my great master, Henry Plantagenet, lord of Normandy, Brittany, Maine and Anjou. Being now free, after many years, to revisit the land of my birth, I have come with a high heart, happy to live over old memories. Ay, trust me; I am Cercamon; and to prove it I will sing for you. They say—" he spoke with a certain proud embarrassment—"that men do not take my voice for another's."

Girault held out a trembling hand.

"Too much honor for me!" he protested humbly. "The generous offer proves your good faith. I accept——"

He broke off short, terrified, at the scrape of a foot on the flags outside. A staff beat loudly on the door, and from the kitchen a brisk maid hurried to open. A tall, burly figure took shape out of the soft summer night and paused with upraised hand.

"The blessing of God upon this house!" the new comer spoke, in deep, bell-like tones.

"And upon you, Father Laurence!" the innkeeper stammered. "Be welcome!"

CERCAMON turned on the intruder with a scowl, anger to have lost the tale for which he had angled so patiently. Girault would not dare speak now. But as the torchlight fell on Father Laurence, the troubadour's wrath melted; for the face that peered from the monk's cowl was one to admire and reverence. The features were strong and serene, the brow majestic, the whole expression gentle and good. The figure, even under the shapeless black cassock, was sinewy, splendidly proportioned. Such a man as this might St. John have been, Cercamon mused; or, more like, St. Paul, since the sad, kind eyes were set above a stern jaw, dominant nose, and firm-set lips.

Girault paused between bows of welcome to bid the serving-maid set a place for the monk, and himself began to clear a portion of the one table. The monk strode straight toward the two men, pointed to Cercamon's platter—on which the picked bones still lay in a film of grease—and cried with sudden fierceness:

"Mutton! Are you a pagan, a servant of Mahound, to eat flesh on Friday? And you, Girault—what mean you by serving foods forbidden on such a day?"

The taverner, all aflutter, pointed to a cobwebbed hour glass.

"It is but half an hour turned Friday!" he babbled.

Cercamon took the explanation out of his mouth.

" 'Tis just after midnight, good father, and so Friday is but half an hour old. 'Twas still Thursday when I finished eating. We are good Christians, mine host and I."

"Ay, so we be!" Girault protested. "And there is a fine sole on the coals for you, father!"

The monk shook his broad shoulders and smiled.

"The less of purgatory for you then, my sons. But I interrupt—you were speaking together when I came in."

To Cercamon's astonishment—for he remembered keenly the man's fear to tell the tale—Girault answered readily:

"I was but telling of Lady Marguerite, of Belle Gard."

Father Laurence caught the taverner's shoulder in a grip that sent him to his knees.

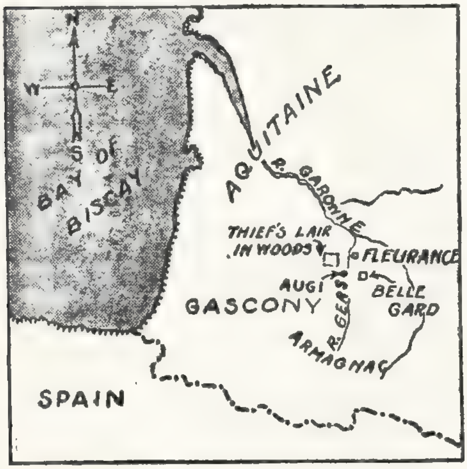
"Wretch!" he cried. "It is death to tell that tale!"

Cercamon, puzzled and somewhat angry, reached out a prodigiously long arm and caught the monk's wrist; and for all his strength Father Laurence was fain to loose his victim.

"If the same charm that opened his lips has power over you," the troubadour said lightly, "I will tell you that I am Cercamon the Troubadour, a man who betrays no secrets—least of all those which concern a woman."

The monk spun around with quickness

that would have done credit to a swordsman. His dark eyes probed Cercamon's, then swept him from head to foot, noting with plain approval the clean lines of the face, the uncanny width of shoulder and reach of arm and the supple carriage of the fine body under the small, bright meshes of his Spanish hauberk.



"I have heard that Cercamon is such a man as you," he conceded. "Your hand!"

Ere Cercamon could stir, Father Laurence snatched at his wrist and held it, looking the while straight at him.

"A steady pulse and honest eyes," he commented, "if the voice matches."

"He would have sung for me, father!" Girault offered.

"For me he must sing!" the monk retorted. "Lady Marguerite's story must not be told to a man who can not prove himself!"

So Cercamon sang; and, to prove himself a troubadour indeed, he sang an *aubade* of the Languedoc, asking pardon humbly at the end for defiling the ears of a holy man with a song of love. But the monk sat still his fine eyes glowing, his corded hand still beating time to the dead cadence of the music. At last he roused himself, made the sign of the cross, and muttered—

"I have sung worse in my youth—God forgive me!"

"And wielded a sword perchance," Cercamon ventured.

"Aye, and wielded a sword; for which I have done bitter penance. But tell on, Girault; this man is worthy our trust."

SO, WHILE Cercamon listened in silence, and Father Laurence punctuated the tale with nods and muttered confirmation, the taverner told his tale:

"Twenty years since, the lord Jaufre de Belle Gard, vassal of the Countess of Fezensac, and lord of a fine castle, became father to the Lady Marguerite. In the same season came the miraculous vintage, named for her. Father Laurence here, then captain of men-at-arms to Messire Jaufre, stood godfather to the girl. Two years after, he abandoned the world and, becoming an Augustine canon, in due time was made chaplain to his former master.

"The maid grew apace, most marvelous fair, so that young knights from many provinces sought her hand. Then her father fell sick, entrusting castle and maid to Father Laurence——"

"And basely I betrayed my trust!" the monk groaned, smiting his breast.

"Not so, good father!" the taverner gently contradicted. "'Twas no fault of yours. Gaston de Fermac, a knight of Auch, was among her suitors. Father Laurence bade him begone, for he was a man of evil life. Wherefore this Gaston devised a black villainy. Sending a false message to Father Laurence summoning him to attend the Bishop of Auch, he bribed the porter of Belle Gard in the chaplain's absence. Through the treacherously abandoned postern the accursed Fermac stole with his men-at-arms, and—may he burn forever!—took the castle by storm, putting to sword the unwary garrison. The Lord Jaufre, sick as he was, they slew in his bed. Only two knights, who had sat late over the dice, heard the clash of arms in time to don mail, rush to the lady's bower and let her down with ropes. They could get no horses, the stables being in Gaston's hands; wherefore all three must needs foot it, by night, over rock and ravine, for Auch. They did not reach its shelter; and since then no man has laid eyes on the Lady Marguerite."

He paused, and Cercamon spoke:

"Truly a pitiful tale—but why so perilous to tell? Surely the wrong has been avenged?"

Girault shook his head and glanced at Father Laurence. Looking from one to the other, the troubadour saw the taverner's face wet with tears and the monk's set like flint. A moment's heavy silence; then Father

Laurence took up the tale:

"The next day I came back from Auch, riding hard; for I looked for something amiss, once I knew the bishop had not sent for me. Indeed, he could not, having departed two days before for Avignon. So I came back, with but two riders, swiftly, but watching the road with care. At a ford of the Gers I came on Girault, then a vine-tender on the lands of Belle Gard. He ran before my horse, crying—

" 'They have taken the castle, and my lady has fled!'

"So I sent one of my riders ahead, while I questioned Girault. When the man came back, having dismounted and crept through the standing grain of the castle fields, he reported Fermac's banner on the wall, and ten good men of my lady's hanging from the merlons. So, giving Girault a cloak to mantle his peasant's gear, I took him back with me to Auch, where I laid complaint with the Countess of Fezensac, who was then ruler of this province. But Gaston had bought himself into her favor; and at his suggestion Marguerite was declared dead, and her lands given over to Fermac. Since then I—consecrated to God's service though I be—am in constant dread of his anger. He has made himself mighty in Auch. Though the countess is dead, and all Fezensac now ruled by the Count of Armagnac in the name of the Duchess Alienor, Fermac holds his own in the favor of them who rule us. In Belle Gard he maintains more than a hundred savage troopers, who work his will without remorse; his spies in Auch report all that is whispered against him; and his swordsmen raven through the city like wolves, murdering all who deny his will."

Cercamon's eyes glowed like living coals.

"And the lady has disappeared?" he breathed. "Fermac has sought for her?"

"Ay, has he not!" the monk rejoined. "He has sought her everywhere. His men-at-arms have hunted her in the forest; his spies have pried through all Auch for her. That she has not been found argues her dead indeed; but Fermac is not one to give up such a quest. If he should find her living, he would either force her to marry him, that her right to her father's estate should pass to him, or slay her, lest she get in his way. Nor has he left anything undone to hide his crime, and none who know of it dare speak. If he guessed that Girault had once toiled on the lands of Belle Gard, Girault would be tortured to reveal the little he knows, or hanged, lest that little reach the ears of the Count of Armagnac, who is now our liege lord and Fermac's."

Cercamon scowled, his hands clenched.

"It was a vile deed," he muttered. "Never shall ye repent telling it to me. I will keep it as secret as you would keep the confessional."

"Meantime," said Girault gloomily, "Fermac squeezes us dry to fill his coffers, and ravages like a beast of prey. He is worse than the Black Thief!"

Cercamon started.

"What of this Black Thief, sirs?" he questioned.

The two eyed him strangely.

"Ay, what of him?" the monk echoed. "You do not know him?"

"Not I," Cercamon answered. "Confidence for confidence—my tale for yours. I am not here for my pleasure only. This city of Auch has sent an appeal to the Count of Armagnac, asking for help against the Black Thief's cutthroats. The count, having his hands full with his lady the duchess's affairs, has sent on the petition to my master, Duke Henry, who by marriage with the duchess is now lord of all this land. The duke, unable to spare men, has sent me, with his letters authorizing me to impress into service such men as I choose from his faithful vassals here. My orders are to gather troops, proceed against the Black Thief and take or destroy him. It would help me much if ye would tell me what ye know of the rascal."

The footsteps of the maid broke in upon them. Neatly she set the monk's place, served his fish and would have poured him wine, which he refused. He fell to at once, eating rapidly, speaking with a full mouth:

"Aye, the Black Thief! But that one does not plunder the poor. It goes ill with all who walk at night, bearing gold or silver; yet he has never harmed a peasant. The rich merchant is his prey, the overbearing knight. He has often robbed Fermac's baggage-trains. It is his daring that makes men fear him so. He has thrice raided to the very gates of Auch."

"A strange thing, this," Cercamon mused. "Why does not Fermac, with his disciplined troopers, make short work of the Thief? It should not be so hard. And if the Thief has robbed him——"

Girault rose, his manner restless.

"The Thief is too cunning. If it were only strength against strength, Fermac would bag him. But the Black Thief is of less account to honest men than Fermac, who can neither keep his own hands off other men's goods nor put down those who plunder him. Your pardon, sir; I must see to your bed."

"In my youth men-at-arms knew how to deal with bandits," Cercamon observed to the monk. "Yet this Thief fears them not."

Glancing warily round the room, Father Laurence turned toward his fellow-guest with the air of a conspirator. It sorted ill with his naturally kind, frank face.

"Nay, he fears them not—fears not Fermac, at least. There may be some grudge between them. Many times has Fermac hunted him; but the Black Thief rides only by night and is very shrewd. It is rumored that he has cut down Fermac's stragglers even while they hunted him, and has vanished without leaving a track. Fermac has set a price on his head. Few dare try to win it. The peasants may or may not know where he hides, but they will breathe no word against him. This is a land of fear!"

He paused; then, leaning close, he whispered—

"A strange and evil marriage, this between Duke Henry and our Duchess Alienor!"

Cercamon shrugged.

"Men say ill of her, but it is not for me to judge. It has this much good, that it makes my master stronger than the King of France and frees me from the ban Alienor placed on my life. Henry Plantagenet is master in his own house."

Father Laurence nodded, thoughtfully.

"You are reputed high in his favor. Now that Alienor has brought him all Poitou and the South in dowry, you will be one of the most influential men in France. It is said the duke harkens to your counsel."

"He does," Cercamon agreed, "but he follows his own."

"Then—" Father Laurence spoke with sudden eagerness—"you can right a great wrong! When you return to Normandy, speak to the duke of the injury Fermac has done Lady Marguerite and beg him to punish the dog!"

Cercamon considered, frowning.

"It can scarce be done," he answered reluctantly. "Duke Henry can not spare a single man—else he would have sent a troop of spears with me, instead of bidding me raise men in his name here. England is in arms against him; the King of France conspires with Thibault of Champagne and Eustace of Boulogne to wrest Brittany from him. Till he has settled with his foes, my lord can undertake no enterprises so far from home—even though Fermac is now his vassal."

"But now that you are here, with power to raise men, you can attack Fermac yourself!" the monk pleaded. "There are many who hate him, and will gladly serve under your banner. They want only a leader."

"And doubtless there are as many more to befriend him. It would plunge the province into civil war. My commission is good only against the Black Thief."

"Then you alone—your cunning——"

"It may not be," Cercamon cut him short. "My lord has given me a task to do; I may not undertake others—even to avenge murdered knights and their injured daughters—till I have carried out his commands."

The monk rose sadly.

"I had hoped for better things from you. I rejoiced when I found you here, knowing your fame as a champion of the weak. Forget what I have told you."

"A hard speech, father. To urge my lord to send troops thus far, when he needs every spear at home, were treason; and to abuse his commission in a private quarrel were disloyalty. If I were free, I would gladly risk my life in your cause."

Father Laurence stood with knitted brows; but at last, as on a sudden impulse, he thrust out his hand.

"Forgive me, my son; not I, but my disappointment reproached you. There is still something you may do for me if you will—something that requires only your single arm, and will not conflict with your commission."

"Name it—it shall be done!"

"Do you fear odds?"

Cercamon laughed merrily, touching his hilt.

"This sword has dealt with odds before! Say on!"

The monk thumped with his staff on the floor, and Girault ran to answer the summons.

"Saddle my mare, friend!" And when the taverner bustled out, Father Laurence bent to Cercamon's ear.

"When Fermac slew my good lord and

friend, Sir Jaufre, I obtained consent from my Superior to dwell as a hermit in the forest. Often friends in the town, whose affairs will not let them visit my cell, give me gold to spend in charity and on masses for the souls of the dead. But I must leave my solitude and come for the gold. I have much with me now. The Black Thief has his informants everywhere. It is needful that I go to my cell tonight; but I fear the Thief. He will certainly set an ambush for me somehere between the city gate and the forest, but will scarce think it necessary to send more than two or three riders against a poor monk. Will you ride with me, and give me the protection of your sword?"

Cercamon's eyes danced.

"If it were any other thing you asked of me, I should regret the soft bed that Girault has made me in yonder chamber. It gives forth a brave smell of lavender. But I am here to find the Black Thief, and you bid me protect you from him! Who knows but we may capture one of his knaves tonight and so get sure news of the Thief himself?"

"Who knows?" the monk echoed, and his tone made Cercamon stare.

But Father Laurence, with the most expressionless of faces, handed Cercamon his helmet; then, bending humbly, helped him lace his mail jambeaux. His fingers had the deftness of a soldier's.

Girault came back, bringing a reek of horseflesh into the room.

"All is ready, father," he announced.

Then he saw Cercamon armed to depart, and his face fell.

Cercamon flung him a piece of gold.

"I ride," he said. "Here is pay for the night."

Weighing the generous fee in his fingers, Girault poured forth eager thanks.

"God go with you, my masters! I will fetch your beast, my lord."

But the troubadour was before him. Stroking his tired gray's muzzle, he saddled it, led it forth and joined the waiting monk in the cobbled court.

"Ready!" he spoke, and vaulted to the saddle.

FATHER LAURENCE led on down a steep, narrow street that ran to the suburb at the foot of the hill. There he drew to a walk, reining up at the city gate, which guarded the bridge over the Gers. The watchman drew aside at sight of his cassock. When Cercamon would have followed, they crossed spears in his path.

"No armed man comes in or out after dark!" growled one.

Father Laurence turned, protesting.

"He is my escort, good sirs!"

"God's blessing on you, father," the warders returned, "but how long have poor monks had escorts?"

Cercamon leaned over in the saddle to speak softly to the guards:

"Your city is a fief of the Duchess of Aquitaine—and I serve the duchess! If you stop me, it will cost you your necks later—or perchance now, for my sword is swift!"

The men peered at him, astounded at his assurance; and he dropped a purse between them.

They let fall their pikes to scramble for it, and grasped it together. It was heavy.

"Pass, *seignior!*" they cried.

Cercamon thrust home the spurs, lest they change their minds; and monk and troubadour thundered over the bridge to the dusty road beyond. Here Father Laurence wheeled to the south.

For the next half hour Cercamon had ado to keep up with him, the mare being fleet and his own fine charger weary. Between fields of grain they passed, that rustled in the frosty wind from the Pyrenees; through a grove of beech, where the horses' hoofs were silenced by deep mast; and so came to the edge of a stream that cut the road. Urging the mare in, the monk rode with the current, westward.

"A poor way this!" Cercamon called, feeling his gray slip on the pebbles.

"Safer!" the other answered briefly.

The stream was a bad road indeed. It plunged through ever-deepening banks, swifter and swifter each moment, till the horses had to set themselves against its surge. Again and again they stumbled on rounded stones, floundering dangerously. Just as Cercamon protested, they came out on a wide pool, where the horses must swim.

"The right bank is low," the monk spoke softly.

They scrambled up the bank—a stretch of sheer, bare rock; a freak of formation that ran far back between dense trees and denser undergrowth, forming a narrow natural path. It stopped abruptly, and they rode into a tangle of briars. The beasts flinched; but from the swishing sound ahead Cercamon knew his companion had found a path. He forced the gray after and, passing the hedge, came into a narrow but fairly open path. Here they rode slowly, Father Laurence easily as one who knows the way, Cercamon fending off drooping branches.

"The Black Thief must be cunning to follow us!" he said. "And you choose a strange place for your cell!"

"Are you afraid?" the monk shot back.

Stung, Cercamon rode on in silence, anger mastering his caution.

Suddenly the undergrowth slipped behind them, and they emerged in a little glen, set with great trees that were no more than blacker wraiths in the night. Somewhere to their right a stream plashed—whether the same they had left, or another, Cercamon could not tell. Following its course, they passed once more into shaggy forest, listening to the unseen waters singing in tones that swelled louder and louder, till at last its roar was deafening.

"Careful here!" the monk warned. "Go not too near the bank!"

Listening, Cercamon made out that the stream, though swift and close on their right hand, was very far below, having cut itself a channel deep down in the living rock. A step too close, and horse and rider would plunge to death in the ravine.

"Here is my cell!" the monk announced. "Dismount!"

He set the example himself; the next moment the hoofs of his led horse clattered over a bridge of thick planks. Cercamon followed, keeping close to the mare's heels. Ignorant of the width of the bridge—for all was black with night and overhanging trees—he felt out before him before he dared set down a foot. It was uncanny work in the dark, the very beams beneath their feet invisible for the thick foliage that dripped in their faces, shutting out the stars. But the peril was short; soon they had their feet on rock again.

The sudden mustiness of the air told Cercamon they had entered a cavern, whose lip, on the brink of the ravine, was unapproachable save for the short bridge. He hesitated, unwilling to go farther into such a place; but the monk's hand reached out for his.

"Do you fear a priest?" he asked reproachfully. "If I did not still need you, I would bid you go back."

"Forward!" Cercamon made answer.

Still clinging to his hand, Father Laurence led him about a sheer right angle in the rock.

"A well-hid cell, this!" Cercamon reflected.

Once again they turned, and came out into the pallid rays of a torch, that showed clean-swept rock beneath them and a natural vault above their heads. Into the dim light glided a dark figure, and a hoarse voice challenged—

"You, father?"

"Father Laurence, with a friend. Let a place be made for us!"

He who had hailed them—a stout, shock-headed countryman—was just disappearing into the only lighted offset. Father Laurence took Cercamon's horse by the bridle, led both beasts into a side tunnel and came back for a torch.

"I will feed and water them," he said. "You would best accept my hospitality for the night."

Cercamon shrugged. He realized that he must stay where he was till day came. Without a guide, one unused to the country could never risk that wild ride along the ravine and through broken, forested ground by night.

A distant, grating sound disturbed him, but he could not guess what it was. Moments passed; and Cercamon, alone in the light of torch and fire, gazed about him with strange perturbation. A strange cell, this, even for a recluse: hidden so well that even men who knew the forest might search for it in vain. Ay, and a strange monk, with the eyes of a saint and the thews of a soldier—a monk who rode fine horseflesh, hid from outlaw and baron and brooded over wrongs done years ago.

Father Laurence returned, his firm lips curved in a thin, ironic smile.

"Welcome, Troubadour!" he cried, his voice ringing like a peal of bells. "Welcome—to the lair of the Black Thief!"

As if the words were a signal, a flock of armed men tumbled from every lateral tunnel-mouth into the main cavern. Taken by surprize, Cercamon flashed out his sword and backed up against the rock wall; but none raised steel or came near him. The whole company—there were at least forty of them—stood off, eying him, and glancing now and again at the monk, as if for orders. They were a rough crew, shaggy and bearded, clad some in hardened leather, some in mail, under coarse, black surcoats. Every man bore sword or pike, and bow. Two who stood out from the mass wore fine baldrics and gold spurs that flashed in the firelight.

Cercamon faced them angrily.

"What means this, monk?" he cried. "If you have lured me hither for my horse and armor, you and your knaves shall pay for them in blood!"

Father Laurence edged back among his men, grasping his stout oak staff; but his eyes gleamed with triumph.

"Wait!" he answered. "You shall be satisfied—when the Black Thief comes!"

From the black surcoats of the men Cercamon glanced at the monk's black cassock.

"Why this mockery?" he sneered. "You are the thief! Thus far you have outtricked me; but you have but opened the game. I am here to bring you to justice—and justice you shall have if I live!"

"I hold you to that promise!" the monk answered calmly.

Cercamon knew he stood in evil case. If none could get at his back, he was nonetheless doomed at the first passage of arms. The odds against him were heavy. Twoscore pairs of eyes gazed greedily at his splendid mail; twoscore hands itched to draw bowstring. He resolved that, rather than die helplessly at the first arrow-flight, he would leap among them as soon as the first bow bent, and go down striking. But the monk had his men well under control; not one bent bow or raised blade.

A shrill whistle sounded; and the monk raised one hand.

"The Black Thief comes!" he announced.

Mail-shod feet rang on the rock floor; and from the lighted lateral, preceded by an armed guard, came a slender figure, clad all in black mail. In silence it strode among the weaponed men, and came to a halt beside the monk, its eyes resting on Cercamon.

THE troubadour returned the stare, having no longer any doubt that this, and not the monk, was the Black Thief. The all-enveloping mail and loose black cloak concealed the lines of the figure, yet not enough to hide its slimness; the features were hidden by the nasal and cheek-armor of the helmet. Yet, though this man was far from the burly ruffian Cercamon had imagined, there was something purposeful, deadly, in the slow, fixed gaze that burned upon the captive's face.

At last the bandit spoke:

"What man is this, father? Why have you brought him?"

Cercamon started. The voice was soft and rich, like that of one gently born; but it was not the voice of a man.

Father Laurence cast a mocking glance at his prisoner.

"It is Cercamon the Troubadour, my lady!" he replied. "I have brought him because he would not have come had I not laid a snare for him. And I held him of great value to us."

Cercamon sheathed his blade with an angry clang and faced the helmeted form.

"What game is this?" he demanded. "I do not fight women, nor do I forgive men who seek to play with me!"

Father Laurence stepped forward, his manner turned courtly.

"Good sir," he said, "you are the guest of the Black Thief—Lady Marguerite de Belle Gard, whom I let you think dead, as most men do. You refused to avenge her on her enemy; wherefore, knowing that none could help her so well as you, I tricked you into accompanying me to her. I was certain you would gladly serve her once you heard her plight from her own lips. Be so good as to follow us!"

Beckoning to the two officers in baldrics, he led the way into the lighted tunnel; and Cercamon had no choice but to follow. The woman in armor strode silently by his side; four black-coats brought up the rear. As they entered this natural chamber in the rock, Cercamon stared in incredulous surprize.

The tunnel, which ran at right angles to the main cavern, was lofty and spacious, but ended abruptly not twenty feet from its entrance. Its contrast with the bare vault he had left was startling. Every inch of its walls was hung with rich tapestries; the floor was heaped with them; silken cushions were piled in the corners, and a rough-fashioned cupboard at the far end was filled with fine vessels of gold, silver, and burnished copper. On a rude table, set about with crudely wrought chairs, lay a sword in a jeweled belt, a well-worn hone beside it.

Lady Marguerite waved Cercamon to a seat on the piled-up cushions and herself took place beside him. Father Laurence stood before them, sandaled feet wide apart, the mockery gone from his grave eyes. Behind him, silent and motionless, stood the two in baldrics and gold spurs, like statues in steel.

Casting aside her helmet, the girl shook out masses of fine black hair, glancing with cold indifference at her involuntary guest. He marveled at the strangeness of her suddenly revealed beauty. For beautiful she was, with fine, small features, a skin soft and dark, a little red mouth and a carriage of the head that would have been dainty, had it not been so proud. Her eyes, large and lustrous black, were cold and bitter.

"You have refused to help me, then?" she spoke; and once more the troubadour thrilled at the melody of her voice. "Truly I knew not that you were in this province, but I have heard much of you—and never till tonight have I heard that you denied aid to a woman!"

Cercamon's thoughts, still whirling with his strange adventure, grew clear at the touch of scorn in her words.

"I denied you no help, lady. I but refused to use, in a private quarrel, the commission given me by my lord, Duke Henry; or to urge him to send against your personal foe those troops he needs to save his own lands. Is it not proof of my readiness to aid the weak that I gave up my warm bed to escort your monk hither, on his plea that he feared the Black Thief? Now I find that the Black Thief and the distressed lady of Belle Gard are one. Surely you, who command so many stout fellows and are feared by a whole countryside, can profit little from the help of one poor sword such as mine?"

Father Laurence laughed.

"It is said that you are not only the most perilous swordsman but also the shrewdest head in all France! Your sword may serve us little—it is your cunning we want!"

Lady Marguerite nodded, her cold eyes still scanning Cercamon.

"It seems Father Laurence has told you of my wrongs. I will not repeat them, then. You are no mere singer, but a soldier as well. Therefore I will not complain to you that I, a woman, have been robbed of home and lands and driven to herd with thieves—in truth, that matters little, for these thieves are the most honest men I have found in this world. But it matters much that my father, sick and helpless, was butchered in his bed, and to this day is unavenged! Help me avenge him, and I care not for lands or life!"

"This land," he said, "is now a field of Armagnac, which itself belongs to the Duchess of Aquitaine. Why have you not appealed, either to the Count of Armagnac—a just man—or to the Duchess Alienor?"

Marguerite laughed bitterly.

"Once, ere Fezensac was merged in Armagnac, Father Laurence asked justice of the countess. Fermac was her vassal; she refused to believe aught against him. Since Armagnac took the province over, Fermac had kept the roads so well patrolled that I, and the few faithful men who have clung to me, dared not risk capture to pass them."

"But now—" Cercamon began.

"Now that twoscore thieves follow me, you would say? Ay, now I could cut my way past all patrols, if I rode by night; but now who would believe my tale? I have been declared dead. If I won through to Armagnac, I must first prove that I am Marguerite de Belle Gard, and thereby reveal to Fermac that I live. Having heard nothing of me in four years, he has lulled himself into the belief that I am dead indeed. If I appealed, and lost my case against him, he would not rest till he had taken me.

"Moreover, I cannot make myself known now without revealing to all France that I—I who come asking for justice—am that Black Thief for whom the gibbets of Auch have so long waited. Nothing can save me now but to kill Fermac and fortify myself behind the walls of the castle of which he robbed me!"

Father Laurence nodded.

"That is why," he explained, "I asked you to appeal for us to Duke Henry of Normandy. Now that he is liege lord of all this land, he could enforce his decision on the Count of Armagnac; and you, whom he loves, could so set forth the matter to him that this Black Thief business would not be held against my lady."

"But why did you, a woman gently born, take to the life of a bandit?" Cercamon objected. "Surely it does not become you; and you yourself see how it now stands against you."

Marguerite made a gesture of impatience.

"For one reputed so shrewd, you are

passing dull! Without a strong following, I should have fallen a prey to Fermac, as soon as he could smell out my hiding place. Without money to buy food, I should have starved. Where should I—a landless fugitive—get men or money? Without both, how should I avenge my father?

"Through Father Laurence and his brethren of the Augustine order, all those men whom Fermac, and others like him, have driven into outlawry were gathered round me. To hold them to me, to feed them and myself, I was forced to rob—ever in the hope that the treasure I took might buy me enough spears to take the field against my enemy. The hope has been vain. Even in the strength of my longing for vengeance, I have never robbed the poor. Only the rich, who oppress the poor, have felt the edge of my wrath. Them, I have pillaged; and most of all I have beset the baggage-trains bearing food, arms, and goods to Belle Gard for Fermac. Were they not rightly mine? Was it not my estates from which he has drawn the gold that bought them? And the prosperous merchants of Auch, who advance him the money to maintain his spears—are they not my foes? I have but taken my own; and so well have I planned my raids that I have never been beaten, surprized or tracked to this place!"

Cercamon's look betrayed both pity and admiration.

"Of a truth, Lady Marguerite, you need no help of me! One who could devise such deeds and carry them out has done more than I dare dream of!"

She shrugged her shoulders. The monk, his thin lips set, spoke for her:

"Now you know the matter. Will you help us, or will you have it said that the first troubadour and swordsman of France turned his back on a woman in distress?"

"I was tricked hither," Cercamon answered softly, "and I was threatened with armed men. It seems that, if I refuse your plea, I may be killed or held a prisoner."

The monk nodded.

"Here you are, and here you bide till you do as my lady bids. Forty stout fellows bar your retreat—and the bridge over the gorge has been withdrawn."

Cercamon rose and whipped out his sword.

"Whistle up your hounds and bid them make an end!" he said.

Father Eustace signed to one of the two officers, who wheeled toward the entrance; but Marguerite, springing to her feet, checked him.

"Not so!" she spoke; and there was admiration in her eyes. "If you will not help me, you are free to go! Gentleman you may not be, but you are too brave to die like a cornered rat!"

Cercamon laughed, a ringing, happy laugh.

"Then, so please your ladyship, I will help you, so far as my poor strength and wit may reach! Do you know me better now, monk?"

"I might have known threats could not move such as you," Father Laurence conceded; and his brawny fist shot out to clasp the troubadour's hand.

Marguerite beckoned to the officers.

"It is well, Cercamon," she said, "that you who have thrown in your lot with me should know two cavaliers such as these, who have given up name, fame and fortune to serve me. Here are Sir Guitard and Sir Simon, who saved me from Fermac on that night of slaughter, four years gone. They, and Father Laurence, are in my counsels."

CERCAMON clasped hands with the two knights—both tall, sinewy men, straight-backed, bowed of leg from years in the saddle. They were men such as the lower nobility often bred—loyal, free from the twisted ambition that made the higher baronage unscrupulous and cruel. All five seated themselves.

"Now for our task," said the monk. "Heaven sharpen your wits, Troubadour!"

"What is this castle like?" Cercamon questioned.

Father Laurence drew quill, ink-vial, and parchment from his scrip, and setting the parchment flat against the floor, began to draw with a cunning hand. As his fingers moved, the ground-plan of a fortress took shape. One of the knights held a torch, and both thrust in quick, shrewd comments as the monk drew. But he, who saw with a soldier's eye as keen as their own, was rarely forestalled.

"Thus sits the keep—here are the demi-towers. Note how the walls command the way. So runs the bailley, walls twelve feet through. Here are the stairs that lead to the parapet—and here. The gates? Ay, two—one here, in the keep; and the postern—so."

He swiftly sketched in the positions of the catapults, the turrets, stables, wells, commenting the while so vividly that the place took palpable shape before Cercamon's eyes. Following both sketch and description closely, Cercamon yet had thought to spare in wonder at the transformation of the man. Tonsure and cassock, girdle and medal, were all that now proclaimed him monk; speech and bearing were those of the old soldier, the one-time captain of men-at-arms.

"And the road thither?" Cercamon asked.

"I will show you tomorrow, by full light of day. You shall see then how well this place is hid, and how we go back and forth between forest and road without being tracked. In Auch men almost doubt whether we lurk in the forest indeed, or come down from the far foothills of the Pyrenees."

"How many men has Fermac?"

"A hundred and thirty—were not Belle Gard so strongly built, his force were all too few to garrison it. My old lord Jaufre devised it so well that few can hold it against many. Fermac is too greedy of his gold to pay the wages of a full garrison."

"He has enemies, you say? Any who might join with us?"

Father Laurence shook his head sadly.

"Enemies he has—some who would join us; but all too few to storm the walls. None who would dare march against Belle Gard. When I spoke to you of his foes who would aid us, I thought of an ambush. Many men there be—poor folk from Auch and the villages—who would gladly waylay him from the thickets, if you could lure him hither——"

"One sees," Cercamon broke in, "that you have been a captain. I have been a leader of captains. You can not beat down men-at-arms with faint-hearted, ill-armed folk, who dare not face walls. Nay, even in ambush such will not stand fast. My plan—for I have the beginnings of a plan—deals with the castle itself."

The monk stared at him, and Sir Guitard looked up with quick protest:

"But you can not storm——"

"Leave that to me," Cercamon interrupted. "Have you the courage to storm the place, if I show you the way?"

Sir Simon thundered out an oath.

"Lead on, Troubadour! Make a breach for us, and we will follow you to Satan's throne!"

Cercamon looked from one to another. The monk's face was puzzled, but resolute; the two knights sat with eager eyes, hands clasping and unclasping about their hilts. As for Marguerite, her fine, keen features were alight with restless enthusiasm. They did not know, these four, what thoughts went on in the troubadour's brain; but all had heard of his deeds, and looked to him for some miraculous wisdom that would gain the almost hopeless end they sought.

"My plan," he resumed slowly, "is venturesome, perilous; yet it is the only way. We must use only your men, my lady, whom you know and trust. Is there any among them who would flinch?"

She shook her head.

"They would die for me," she answered simply.

"Then it is needful only that you trust me—all of you. Trust me fully, no matter what appearances be. If ye promise this, and follow my commands to the letter, I will pledge my word to bring you within the walls of Belle Gard."

Leaping to her feet, Marguerite snatched the belted sword from the table and girt it about her. Then, clasping the troubadour's hand, she gave her promise, her eyes gleaming like twin fires. After her, each of the others echoed her pledge—to trust and to obey.

"How soon shall we ride?" the girl questioned, her impatience unleashed.

"I ride tomorrow, when it is fully light," Cercamon answered, "with Father Laurence as guide to the edge of the wood. The rest may not move till ye hear from me—it may be three days, or even more. To strike too soon were to court disaster. But you, my lady, must tarry here, even when the others ride forth. Nay, protest not! My plan is ruined unless you obey."

"But I can use a sword!" she blazed at him. "Am I to have no hand in the avenging of my own father?"

"You shall play the most vital part of all," he assured her; and his promise quieted her. "But all will fail if you leave this place till you get word from Father Laurence that the time has come."

"The signal?" the monk reminded him.

"That I will tell you tomorrow. Now I

pray you, let me sleep. I shall need my wits with me tomorrow."

FROM the shelter of a wooded hill two men looked out over the rolling country to the east, where little villages lay amid the ripening grain, commanded at far intervals by grim, gray towers. A light breeze ruffled the wheatfields, where the sun lay soft and warm.

"There lies the Auch-Fleurance road, Troubadour," said the monk. "Beyond—see yonder, on the second hill—stands Belle Gard."

Cercamon peered into the morning sun, shading his eyes with his hand.

"I see a gray mass against trees," he muttered.

"Ay; that is it. There is a wood beyond."

"The chambers are on this side of the keep?"

"As I have said."

"And your lady—the Black Thief—has never raided east of the road?"

"Never. To do so would have exposed her too much to Fermac's spears, and to the city forces from Auch and Fleurance. She has snatched up convoys almost under the walls of Auch—but on this side the city."

"Good. There is hope for our plan, then."

The monk watched him with anxious eyes.

"It is a shrewd plan, Troubadour; but the risk is great. If you fail——"

"If I fail, there is still a way out. Watch for my signal—a light from one of the chambers, well after dark. See to it that your lady obeys my order. I fear for her—she is headstrong, and fierce for Fermac's blood. A chance arrow——"

"She shall obey, though I have to bind her!" the monk assured him. "The Saints be with you, and with us!"

Mounting, Cercamon urged the gray down the forested slope to the waving grain. With all the heedlessness of the aristocrat, he trampled through the unripe harvest, at an angle that bore him east and slightly south, casting for the byroad that would lead from Auch to Belle Gard. An hour's ride through the uneven fields brought him upon it.

The castle road was rough and ill-kept, as if its owner were too sure of its safety to heed its repair, or preferred to use his peasants in the fields. Cercamon smiled grimly.

"A bad vassal this. My lord of Armagnac would think the less of him, did he know how Fermac neglects his road-building. A greedy man, I think."

The gray pulled down to a walk as he felt the slope; and under the frowning wall wound horse and rider, catching the sheen of spears from the toothed parapets. As each fresh turn opened out a new view of the stronghold, Cercamon scanned it with trained, appraising eye.

Belle Gard was a grim, square tower, standing as it were astride the roughly oval wall of the bailey, which followed the contours of the hill, the crest of which had been cut down to form a base for the fortress. Too high and too far from a stream for a moat, the place needed none, for its lofty walls held the entire hill and commanded the plain beneath. Making the last circuit—for the road wound like a spiral stair—Cercamon saw, in the rear, a narrow postern, flanked by two stout demi-towers; and he remembered that it was through this rear gate Gaston de Fermac had made his treacherous assault. On this side, too, a good mile east of the hill, lay the wood Father Laurence had pointed out to him. The last rise of the road brought him to the arched gate of the keep.

This, too, was flanked with lesser towers and dominated by the out-jut of the machicolated tower. Cercamon nodded approvingly at the lowered portcullis and the twinkle of points at the arrow-slots.

"A good soldier," he mused.

"Who comes?"

The voice from the wall was harsh and arrogant; and arrogantly Cercamon answered:

"Cercamon the Troubadour, whom all men know! Shall I enter, or seek a nobler host?"

There was no answer. Either the challenger desired no guests or he had gone to report to some higher authority. Helmeted heads peered down from the wall, eager to see him who bore so well-known a name. For many minutes Cercamon waited, conscious of the eyes that watched him, the weapons that glinted above his head, uncertain of the outcome. At last the portcullis rose with a screech and the massive double gates swung open.

The mouth of the tower was filled with

men-at-arms. For a moment Cercamon feared lest even a troubadour—eagerly received in every feudal castle—might find a hostile greeting in Belle Gard. But the man-at-arms smiled at him, and a tall officer came forward to clasp hands with him.

"Welcome, in my master's name!" the officer cried with boyish enthusiasm. Naught could be seen of his face under the steel save a stubborn chin and a pair of merry, ardent eyes. "I am Marc de Lot, knight vassal of Fermac and captain of archers. We are rustic folk here, whom such as you rarely deign to visit. Ho, grooms! Look to his horse!"

The spearmen clustered thickly to see the distinguished guest, of whose golden voice all men had heard. Through them Sir Marc shouldered his way, across the guardroom, up a winding stair in the thickness of the wall. Cercamon followed, his quick eyes taking note of the arrow-slots at each landing, the doors that opened off, even the number of steps.

At the third landing Marc stopped and, flinging open a heavy door, led the way into a narrow corridor. From this other doors opened: one on the left, and many—though it was hard to see how many, the light that filtered in from the arrow-slots being dim—on the right. Entering one of these, the knight showed Cercamon into a small but richly appointed chamber.

IT WAS poorly lighted by two narrow windows, furnished with iron shutters; and between these an arrow-slot. Thick candles, stuck in sconces, stood in each corner of the room. Every opening, save the door, was in the outside wall; against the cross-wall stood a massive but narrow oaken bed, splendidly carved. Across from it was a deep clothes-chest, and three low-backed chairs, black with age and rich with gilded carving. Furs and embroidered stuffs, fine in workmanship, but worn ragged, covered the floor. Over the bed was laid a coverlet of Moorish silk.

"The chamber of honor!" laughed Marc de Lot. "My lord bids you forgive such meager hospitality, he being but poor and you the favored singer of the noblest lord in France. Bide but a moment; I will fetch water and wine."

While he was gone, Cercamon stood at the window, gazing out past the slope of the hill and the fields beyond. As Father Laurence had said, the chambers faced west. Far in the distance he could see the green loom of the forest that sheltered the Black Thief.

He turned quickly, as the door was thrown open and Marc de Lot entered. Behind him staggered a menial, bearing a huge hooped tub, followed by four others with vessels full of water. Behind these came a sixth, bearing towels, basin, cups, and a flagon of wine. When they had set down their burdens, and the contents of the vessels poured into the tub, Sir Marc bade them begone. Though he spoke gently, they shrunk away like whipped curs. He closed the door.

"By your leave, Troubadour, I will wait on you myself."

"It is not fitting for a knight—" Cercamon began; but the other interrupted with bluff good nature:

"It is an honor. I will not have it said that we of the South lack courtesy."

He laid aside his helmet, doffed his mail, and stood there in rusty leather, a fine figure of a soldier. Cercamon marveled inwardly that one who followed a man of Fermac's repute should have so gallant and wholesome a face, and eyes wherein shone the very spirit of chivalry.

When Cercamon had stripped and climbed into the tub, Sir Marc stood by with towel in hand.

"Splendor of heaven, but you have shoulders!" he cried. "And arms! No wonder you are renowned as a swordsman!"

Cercamon laughed, reaching for the towel; but the knight drew back.

"Come out, and I will dry you. So! I should not care to meet you point to point!"

"It is in the feet, eyes and wrist no less than in the arms," Cercamon explained. "A good swordsman is more than a blacksmith in mail. But I warrant you wield a good blade yourself—you have a fine reach."

"You should see Gaston de Fermac, my uncle and master!" Marc replied. "He would make a match for you, if any man may!"

Cercamon smiled, glad that he was to be pitted against a strong antagonist; yet he felt a sudden pang that this young man was of the blood of Fermac. There was no guile in Marc de Lot, if Cercamon read his eyes aright. He was of the age when men adore brave deeds, and worship—with all too little discrimination—those who are strong enough to do them.

When his guest was glowing from the towel, Marc drew from the wardrobe tunic and hose of velvet, rich and fine, though of an antique cut, and a scarlet mantle.

"Wear these, till your own can be cleansed of dust," he said. "Mine would pinch you, and my lord's would be overlong. These belonged to him who held this place before Fermac. He was just such as you in stature."

Cercamon winced at this outspoken offer of a murdered man's clothes, but he smiled a little grimly and put them on. After all, there was a certain ironic justice in the situation. He, who meant to avenge Jaufre, would first appear before the murderer in the outward guise of the victim. It was a good omen.

Pouring the wine, Sir Marc offered him a cup, and then—with that age-old courtesy that had its roots in the wish to show good faith, and to prove the wine free from poison, drank first. As they emptied their beakers, there was a stir in the corridor—the sound of many feet, rough voices and much laughter. A great voice boomed out, and all others fell silent. An excited chattering followed.

"You are in good time for undernmeal," de Lot observed. "My lord announces your visit. Come!"

Cercamon left his mail behind, but buckled on his sword-belt, and followed the impatient de Lot. An excellent young man, he thought; prompt to courtesy, with a fine appetite for food as well as glory.

They entered the corridor on the heels of a considerable company, who turned to stare frankly and nudged each other. There was nothing hostile, nothing rude, in their manner, but a plainly expressed delight and admiration.

All were making for the single doorway in the left wall, a huge entrance with double leaves, capable of defense if the rest of the keep should be taken. Entering in his turn, Cercamon found himself in the great hall—a spacious room strewn with rushes, and furnished with tables of deal laid across trestles. The two long tables that ran along the walls were bare boards, though set with many steaming dishes; but on a dais at the far end stood a lesser *table dormant*, a fine piece of well-carved oak, gleaming with fine damask and a service of silver bowls and flagons. It was set for fifteen. At the place of honor, in the middle of the farther side, stood the massive chair of the lord of the castle.

The men-at-arms off duty, and their sergeants, trooped to the lower tables and stood waiting at their places, while their betters advanced leisurely toward the dais. At the head of the household—a little group of knights and higher officers, steward, and chaplain—strutted a huge man in fine but threadbare garments. Ostentatiously, with proud glances from arrogantly lowered lids, he took his place in the seat of honor. At a curt nod from him, the household seated themselves about him; and only then, with an unconcealed sigh of relief, the soldiers sat, reaching out for the smoking dishes. They were checked at once by their lord, who rose with an impressive gesture.

"My uncle loves to do all things in fair order," de Lot smiled, and led Cercamon forward.

As they approached the dais, every man stood to honor the guest.

"My lord Gaston, knight of Fermac, Castellan of Belle Gard!" Sir Marc announced. His voice and face were serious, but one elbow nudged the troubadour's ribs. "I present Cercamon, greatest of troubadours, vassal to Henry, Duke of Normandy, Brittany and Anjou!"

Fermac came down from the dais, his hand outstretched.

"I greet you as I would greet your master," he spoke pompously. "My house is yours. Command, and you shall be obeyed. Great is the honor you confer upon us!"

Cercamon took his hand; indeed, he could scarce do otherwise.

"Noble sir," he answered, "I thank you for your welcome, in the name of the duke, my master—and yours."

He emphasized the last two words, feeling certain that France knew how Henry's marriage with the Duchess of Aquitaine had made all the South change lords.

Fermac's broad face flushed, and his eyes kindled. With something of an effort he swallowed his pride.

"My lord and yours," he admitted. "Do you come, then, with commands from the duke?"

"I do," Cercamon replied. "But we can speak of them later, if it be your pleasure. I would not disturb your revelry with affairs of state."

Fermac bowed, and motioned him to the vacant seat on his own right hand. Sir Marc took his place at the baron's left. Instantly a flock of domestics poured in from the kitchens at the rear, bearing flagons of wine and hot trenchers. All fell to, helping themselves with their fingers from great pots of stew and platters of roast meat, cutting the larger pieces with their daggers, and licking the grease from their hands. The hot food and the wine for a time absorbed their full attention; but as hunger was satisfied, tongues were loosed. A great clatter of talk arose.

AT LAST Fermac beat with his huge fist on the table, and the servants trooped in to remove the dishes and fetch the richer wines. There was a general hush, which Cercamon understood; but before doing his part as guest he wished to study the company into which he had thrust himself. He kept up a steady flow of talk with Fermac and de Lot, watching their faces as closely as courtesy permitted.

He scarce knew what to make of his host. In his apparel, and in the furnishing of his hall, Fermac was plainly a niggard. The ragged remnants of the splendor that apparently had been due to Jaufre of Belle Gard still decked the walls; but nothing new in tapestry or furniture seemed to have replaced them. So far, then, Fermac was close-fisted; yet his entertainment was good. Vanity was openly revealed in his every pose, in his pompous dignity and his slowness to admit vassalage to Duke Henry.

He was clearly an arrogant, tight-fisted, self-sufficient man; but there was about him no trace of that brutality Cercamon had expected to see. His features were heavy, his mouth set and grim; but even in his hard, black eyes there was nothing that could be called malevolence. Indeed, his look was frank, bold and honest. In figure he was huge, as broad as Cercamon and more than a head taller.

As for young de Lot, he was neither swaggerer nor popinjay; but just such a clear-eyed, open-hearted young soldier as could be found about the courts of the first princes of France. The more Cercamon saw of him, the more he liked him; and his knowledge of men told him that this clean-souled youth could have no guilty knowledge of the deed with which Fermac stood accused.

Nor was the company the hard-faced set of ruffians the troubadour had thought to find. Stout fellows they were, neither better nor worse than most of their mercenary class. The half-dozen officers were hawk-featured fighting men, just such as thronged that Norman court itself. Cercamon became uneasy, wondering how such men as these could be the murderous bullies that had butchered a sick man in his bed, hanged his good knights and dispossessed a harmless girl.

The company, too, eyed Cercamon, still marveling at the chance that had brought so famous a singer among them. There was a touch of impatience in Fermac's eye. Understanding, Cercamon turned to him.

"My lord, you will be waiting for the latest song—if there be anything in poesy that the North can teach the South."

Fermac's red face beamed.

"Sing on! We shall be in your debt. Though you come from the North, the South bore you, and is proud to welcome her own again!"

So Cercamon sang, and sang his best; lest any in after days should say that he had dealt unfairly with the master of Belle Gard. He sang a stately canzo, celebrating his good lord the Duke of Normandy; a lilting aubade, to which Fermac kept time with his big, hard hands; and a chant of war that rang and thundered till the men-at-arms drowned its last echoes in cheers.

"Faith of my body!" Fermac bellowed, clapping him on the shoulder. "The roof is blest that harbors you! I pray you, bide with me as long as ever you can."

"That I will do," Cercamon agreed, "on one condition: That my master's commands find you prompt to obey."

At the word "obey" Fermac scowled.

"Repeat them, and I will judge!" he barked.

In his manner Cercamon at last perceived the kind of man with whom he had to deal; and he reproached himself that he had forgotten what manner of folk the South bred. Fermac's passion was independence; his weakness, impatience of feudal loyalty. He could not hope—as the Norman barons could and often did—to undermine and at last usurp their ruler's power; but he meant to rule his little domain as a petty king. With this end in view he could intrigue and murder, without acknowledging that he had done wrong; for the end, to such as he, justified the means.

He had gone far toward realizing his ambition, having been but a vassal knight till the possession of Belle Gard. The merging of Fezensac in Armagnac had left him without a feudal superior near enough to interfere with his acts. Nor would he ever dream himself guilty of wrong-doing; whatever pleased him, and served his ends, must be right. Though Cercamon had forgot this trait of his countrymen, he was ready for it. Drawing a folded parchment from his belt, he thrust it into his host's hands.

Breaking the seal, Fermac opened it and stared at the impress of the Plantagenet leopards on the wax.

"Ay, from the duke," he growled. "But I can not read."

And he passed it to his chaplain.

The priest, a round little man and clean-shaven, rolled his eyes in astonishment.

"This is an order," he announced in a shrill voice, "for all who read to give the bearer, Cercamon the Troubadour, such aid as he may ask, in men, arms and gold, against—the Black Thief!"

Fermac's jaw dropped.

"The Black Thief? The duke has heard of him?"

"There have been complaints from Auch," Cercamon explained.

Fermac's eyes glittered.

"I am glad!" he said. "It was time the rascal was hanged. What forces have you brought, and where are they lodged? In Auch?"

Cercamon smiled.

"They are under your roof, my lord!"

"Under my—ha! You mean that I am to supply them? If it were in any other cause, I should ask by what right your master makes free with my spears—but I would give you my right hand if it would serve to catch the Black Thief! But how can you succeed, when I have gone out against him five times and have not so much as laid eyes on him or found his lair?"

"As to the duke's right," Cercamon replied, "he is your liege lord. It can not have escaped him that you—the strongest castellan in these parts—have failed to bring the Thief to justice. I fear my lord may be angered with you, deeming you slack in keeping the peace. Yet I can assure him of your efforts—and by aiding me now, you can win back his confidence. Though it were hard for me to accomplish that which has baffled you, I have some hopes. I have already seen something of this country—which is the land of my birth. I think I have learned how to bring you eye to eye with the Black Thief. If you will do as I ask, I will pledge myself to deliver him into your hands. But I will not be so insolent as to bid you give over your troops to me. Rather will I ride with you, and show you whither I think it wisest to lead them."

He had gaged his man aright; Fermac's face beamed at this concession to his vanity.

"We will go forth tomorrow!"

Cercamon shook his head.

"Too soon, my lord. My plans need careful preparation. We must wait for a a dark night."

Marc de Lot laid a hand on Cercamon's arm.

"Do not leave me out of this venture!" he implored.

"By my honor, no! You shall have a place of glory!"

Cercamon spoke heartily, but his mind misgave him. In the plot he had contrived there had been no place for Marc, nor could he yet see how to use him. It would have been easier had he liked the man less.

FERMAC himself showed his guest over the castle. Having—as he deemed—asserted his independence without refusing the will of the duke his suzerain, he felt bound to show the duke's emissary how well he defended his fief. If the troubadour carried back a good report of him, he could remain the longer unmolested by troublesome inquiries from his liege lord.

Everything he saw assured Cercamon of the strength and readiness of the defense. There was a well in the thickness of the keep wall, and another in the bailley, from which garrison as well as beasts could be easily and plenteously watered. The stables were mere stalls—easy of access—set into the eastern and southern walls, breaking off in the east wall, where the postern stood.

Here paced at all times a sturdy man-at-arms, ceaselessly on guard; and within call of the guardroom. Servants and grooms scurried about the courtyard, drawing water and fetching food for the horses that stamped and nickered in the stalls.

From the busy court to the farther battlements Cercamon looked; and he saw that Fermac was not one to be lightly surprized. Along the parapet strode sentinels, armed with bow or crossbow, pacing their stations smartly, ever keeping an eye on the plain below. Here and there were catapults, piles of javelins, open chests of arrows, pots of oil, and fires ready laid.

"Had Jauffre de Belle Gard maintained such vigilance, he would not have lost lands and life!" the troubadour reflected. "And I, who have been sent to catch a thief, would not now be defending the thief. But when the thief is a woman wrongly oppressed——"

Long he lay awake that night in his soft bed, weighing the chances of his plan. If he could but keep Fermac's confidence—and he had gained it easily enough—he would win. But there was chance of accident; chance that Fermac would prove hard to manage. Moreover, Cercamon was proud of his honor; and he had passed his word to do two conflicting things: To restore Marguerite to her castle, and to deliver the Black Thief into Fermac's power. The second promise was part of his scheme for accomplishing the first; he meant to do both, and to make the result a victory for the girl. But if either she or Fermac disregarded his instructions, he would be hard put to it to keep his word to one or both.

In the morning he rose fresh and gay, for all he had slept but little. He found his host merry with the prospect of a man-hunt. Cercamon's reputation for cunning was well-known to Fermac—the fame of his deeds had rung throughout France. So it was that the baron felt more confidence of success with such an ally than he had yet had cause to feel in his own unaided strength, even though he had the advantage of a knowledge of the country much more accurate than the troubadour's.

"Come to the battlements!" he cried eagerly. "I have a fair sight for your eyes!"

Following him, Cercamon felt his impression of the day before confirmed. The place was big enough for a much larger garrison than Fermac's hundred and thirty men-at-arms; yet it was so stout, so well-arranged, that half that number could hold it against heavy odds. No wonder Fermac had coveted it, aye, and played foully for it.

As they approached the parapets, Cercamon heard hammers ringing and turned inquiring eyes on his host.

"A welcome for the Black Thief," Fermac chuckled. "You shall see."

And Cercamon saw. At the edge of the rampart, in full view from the plain, rose the ugly, menacing arm of a gallows.

The hair rose at the base of Cercamon's scalp. For all his bluff good humor, Fermac was indeed the kind of man he was reported—cruel, delighting in grim deeds.

"This is unwise, my lord," Cercamon reproved him. "The Thief will see and understand that we mean to move against him."

Fermac ran one hand along his beard and gazed ruefully at his nearly finished gibbet.

"By the Mass! You are right; but 'tis too late now to take it down. If he has spies out, they have seen already. And 'twere a pity to leave so fair a scaffold unfleshed— Stay, I have it! There is a peasant in my dungeon who refused his daughter to me. I will hang him, and trick the Thief with a false scent!"

If Cercamon had felt some slight remorse at the thought of beguiling a man—however villainous—who trusted him, it vanished now. Fermac was brave, and a good host; but like many of the worse spirits of his class, he was a beast, unashamed of his brutishness.

They stood in the very shadow of the gallows, the hammers clanging above them, and looked out over the waving wheat to the forest beyond, where the Black Thief lay hidden.

"The fox is in his earth," laughed the baron, "but we shall have him out! Shall we start tonight, Troubadour?"

"Nay; there will be a moon. Wait for a cloudy night. One glint of moonlight on your mail as you cross the fields, and he would take cover."

Fermac nodded.

"And if he is truly there, and not in the Pyrenees, as some say——"

"In the Pyrenees!" Cercamon scoffed. "A poor guess, inspired by failure to find him where he hides! As well think him in the Alps. 'Tis too far to the Spanish hills for him to use them for a refuge. Trust me, he is in yonder forest. We shall hunt him as men hunt the boar in Normandy—a rare trick, that I will show you. But all in good time—in good time!"

"Plague on it, how you curb my ardor! But you are right—men say truly that you have no match for shrewdness."

Cercamon turned.

"There are woods on the east of the castle," he ventured. "Do you not fear surprize from that side?"

Fermac laughed.

"On that side I have no foes; and if I had, Belle Gard commands the road. There is no advantage in felling the forest; 'tis thriftier to thin the trees for fuel, sparing the rest."

Cercamon had the answer he wanted. If Fermac feared no foe to the eastward, he would watch there none too carefully.

Three days passed, with no abatement of the clear, dry weather and bright nights. On the fourth, clouds hung heavy in the sky. Fermac was jubilant.

"The wind has changed," he announced. "These clouds will gather thicker through the night. It will rain tomorrow. The time has come!"

All through the afternoon his officers went about among the men-at-arms, seeing that swords were sharp, spear-points freshly ground, mail mended and polished. The horses were given all they would eat. Fermac and Marc de Lot sat together in the baron's chamber, discussing their plan of action. At a word from Cercamon, the cooks and kitchen-knaves were set to such toil as they had seldom known.

"Each man," the troubadour said, "should carry two days' provisions. 'Twill be a hard task, at best, to hunt down the Thief; and we must not give over till his band is crushed."

"I will take fourscore spears," Fermac decided.

"How many has the Thief?"

Fermac shook his head.

"I know not—but scarce that many; and my lads are trained soldiers."

"Trained," Cercamon ventured, "to bear the shock of mass attack on the open plain—scarce trained to play at a murderous hide-and-seek with men who know every brake, every tree, in the forest. Stout though they be, they are not at home there. The Thief is on his own ground; and that he knows it as he knows his own hand is proved by the ease with which he has already evaded you there. You will have to beware ambush in every thicket; every trunk or leafy crown may hide an archer; and there may be marshes and broken ground where a desperate few can stand off many."

"That there are!" Sir Marc interjected. "It is evil country. Take more men, my uncle."

"This is your venture, Troubadour," Fermac conceded. "How many men do you advise?"

Cercamon seemed to ponder.

"I should take full sixscore," he spoke judicially. "We can not hope to hunt the Black Thief down in his own forest unless we draw a cordon round him, and so close in the circle slowly, beating as for game. Otherwise he will merely dodge us back and forth till our men are weary. Sixscore will be none too many—unless you fear to expose Belle Gard."

Fermac's red cheeks puffed out.

"Fear? I fear! Look you, Troubadour: I fear no man, but make men fear me! There are none who dare strike at me, save the Thief; and with my lads driving him in on his lair, he can not harm Belle Gard. Why, man! My walls are stout enough for ten to hold them against a troop of spears!"

So it was determined that they should sally forth two hours before dawn, in full force, leaving but a dozen men—including the chaplain and a sergeant—to hold the castle. It was few enough; but, as Fermac said, he had nothing to fear. And he was stung by Cercamon's shrewd hint that he was afraid. Vanity was indeed his weakness.

At dusk the castle hummed with activity. Lights bobbed and flickered in the bailley, while grooms sacked oats and trussed hay for two days' supply—for the stall-fed horses of the garrison would not thrive on grass alone—and food for the men was packed in saddle-bags. A subdued, excited buzz from the guardroom betrayed the keenness of the men-at-arms for a venture that would break the dullness of garrison routine. One would have said that the very beasts sensed what was in the wind; the lights and bustle kept them on edge. Horses pawed and fretted; cattle lowed unquietly; the cocks crowed as if it were daybreak.

The household sat late at supper. Fermac's mood was so blithe that he drank and boasted for three; and his officers followed his example. Cercamon drank little, pleading a head grown weak among the abstinent Normans. The others railed him; but Fermac bade them be still.

"Fools! That head of his is the sharpest in France; would ye have him dull it? His wits work for us this night!"

So the baron made no objection when Cercamon rose from table early, to get some sleep ere they must ride. Once in his chamber, he shut the door carefully, struck flint on steel and went close to the window with a lighted torch. Then, retreating a little, he passed thrice with the torch before the opening and stood listening.

From somewhere across the fields a dog howled, thrice. Once more he gave his signal, and again the dog answered. Satisfied, he stuck the torch in its cresset, removed his sword-belt and set to work—quietly—with a small hone that he carried in his pouch.

IN THE darkest hour of the night the garrison rode forth, moving slowly down the sandy road, lest the jingle of their mail carry across the plain. They wound about the hill like an enormous snake, uncoiling at the foot to launch itself across the fields. There the pace was increased to a trot, which brought them to the forest edge well before dawn.

Cercamon tugged at Fermac's rein.

"Now we must work swiftly!" he advised. "Send twoscore men along the northern edge, and twoscore along the southern, with orders to spread out thin. When the two detachments establish contact, they shall work toward the center, narrowing the circle as they go. Meantime the rest shall strike straight through the wood from where we stand and so serve as a corps to which all may rally."

"Is it wise to divide our force?" de Lot questioned.

"Were it not foolish to drive sixscore men in a wedge through the center of the forest, while the Thief and his *rascaille* escaped by the edges?"

Fermac nodded.

"Right, Troubadour! We must drive them like deer. Ho, knights!"

As the officers rode in, he gave orders as Cercamon had advised.

Marc was still dissatisfied.

"Evil may come of this!" he protested.

"Not for my lord," Cercamon urged. "We shall ride with him, at the head of your twoscore archers. We must lead the advance through the center. It will go hard with any who oppose so strong a force. If we are hard-pressed, the blast of a trumpet will bring help."

De Lot on his left, Cercamon on his right, the master of Belle Gard advanced. Their way led up a steep, forested slope, in the first gray of dawn. Branches slapped them smartly, drenching them with dew; sleepy birds roused before them; their horses' hoofs beat a dull diapason to the creak of leather and the clink of mail. Now and then some rider, smitten across the face by a thorn-branch, cursed under his breath. On and on they toiled, through the silvering daybreak and the late-coming woodland day; till the mounting sun, penetrating the screen of foliage, started the sweat beneath their armor.

Their work was no more than begun when they topped the ridge. On the higher, rolling ground the wood was denser, broken by streams they must often ride along for irritating distances, by rockgirt gulches or boiling pools. After many hours they brought up against a brake that they could not force a way through, and must needs ride round it. The going was hard, so that they made poor speed. But ever and again came faint, thin hails from the far distance, growing gradually louder as the day advanced, marking the progress of their comrades beating the coverts.

"They draw in to us!" Cercamon exclaimed. "But 'twill be long ere they can work so wide a circuit. Ours is the easier task."

"Some may find this ease!" Fermac grunted. "Here have we ridden half the day, and found nothing. But for my nasal, my eyes had been scratched out long since. *Peste!* Now we can no longer ride even two abreast, and this is a rare spot for an ambush!"

Cercamon laughed gaily, to hide his mounting anxiety. The complexity of his schemes—necessary for their success—kept him fearful for their outcome; and the worst was that the decisive factor depended on others. Yet, as he had told the monk, there was a way out in case of failure.

THE dog that had howled the night before fell silent as soon as Cercamon had removed his torch from the window. Soon after came the pound of galloping hoofs from somewhere amid the wheat—dying away to the westward. By midnight a horseman slid like a ghost into the wood just above the Auch-Fleurance road, and there dismounted.

All about him the undergrowth rustled, though there was no wind. Some one whistled, a series of four ascending notes; and the rider answered. Twigs cracked; mail rang softly; dim forms suddenly surrounded him in the cloud-veiled gloom. Only those closest—close enough to touch him—could be seen, and they only as shadows. The others could be guessed only by the faint sounds of their approach.

"Father Laurence?"

"Ay, lady." The horseman scarce spoke above a whisper. "The signal has come. Is all ready?"

"All are here. Will the way be clear?"

"For that we must trust the troubadour. I have confidence in him. His repute——"

"I know," Marguerite broke in. "I trust him also. But I see no purpose in his order that I wait in the cavern till you have done the work. This is my quarrel."

"He is right, my lady. If he has prepared the way for us, the work ahead will be short but bloody. If you went with us, a chance-sped arrow, a single sword-stroke, might end your life. What then of the plan, or of us? Fermac would remain master of Belle Gard, and we should be outlaws forever. But if you live, yet, though we all die, Cercamon will find a way to make you mistress of Belle Gard once more. His plan is best; you must lie close in the cavern, with four men, while we strike for you."

"But if they find me—" the girl protested.

"There, too, we must trust Cercamon. Remember, they have never yet found your lair; nor are they likely to now. The troubadour will mislead them."

"If aught goes wrong——"

"If we do not as he bids us, all will go wrong. How can he help us, if he counts on our doing that which we do not do? Now arm me, some of you."

Unseen hands brought the monk mail and helped him strip off his cassock. A shield was hung about his neck, a sword at his waist. Horses were led up, snorting.

"Ride!" Father Laurence commanded. "Back to the cavern, my lady!"

Hidden by the blackness of the overcast night, six and thirty men scrambled down to the road, and trotted some two miles in the direction of Fleurance. Then, at a word from their leader, they wheeled to the right, dashing through the fields on a line that would bring them out another two miles north of Belle Gard. Used to night work, the outlaws rode without straggling, keeping in touch by the sounds of hoof and harness.

"Pray God we pass not too close to them as they ride west!" spoke one who rode close to the monk.

"That is the troubadour's business, Guitard. He is no fool. He means to lead them as far southwest of the castle as we are north of it. They should pass without hearing us."

Nor did they meet a soul as they trampled through the ripening grain. At last, north and a little east of the castle, well out of hail from its walls, they rode into the wood from whence Fermac feared no foes.

"The first time we have crossed his line!" the monk muttered. "By God's grace, it will be the last!"

He crossed himself and led the way south through the forest. Now the hoofbeats were muffled by the leaf-fall of years, and they were forced to keep in touch by whistling. Again and again the signal, not too loud, ran up and down the column. After a time they drew to a walk, and then the work was easier.

Suddenly they were out among the last trees, with their faces toward the castle, though they could not see it.

"Dismount, lads!" the monk ordered. "We shall approach more safely on foot. The road is close."

They tethered their horses at the edge of the wood, then, on foot, stole softly across the open space between its edge and the hill. In the utter darkness their black surcoats were as invisible as if they had been so many ghosts. West, and above them, lights twinkled faintly from the tower, which otherwise was hidden.

"The watch, in the keep," Father Laurence commented. "Cercamon agreed to see to it that there would be few enough for us to deal with. Forward—up the road!"

They followed the winding way, climbing

at a steady pace, till the castle lights twinkled almost above their heads. Then——

"To the left!" spoke the monk. "Straight up! Climb warily and keep touch!"

The hill was steep, but not badly broken. Its bareness would have been fatal to them by day; but now they were invisible. On and on they clambered, each reaching out every few steps to touch the man ahead. Arriving on the crest, they halted to fetch breath; then they gathered close.

"The postern—just ahead!" whispered Father Laurence to Guitard. "Pass the word along to walk softly, lest your mail make too much noise."

They moved on, so slowly that the meshes of their armor scarce whispered. Now and then a displaced pebble rattled down the slope; but the only warders were in the keep, distant from them by the entire length of the bailley. Minutes that seemed hours dragged by ere they halted under the loom of the wall.

Father Laurence whistled softly—so softly that none could have heard him through the solid oaken leaves of the postern gate. Instantly—but slowly, lest steel rattle against leather—each man drew sword, save for a dozen in the forefront. These tightened their grips on the staves of their pikes.

Reversing his sword, Father Laurence beat loudly on the gate with the pommel.

"Open, open!" he roared, all the music gone from his voice, which he strove to make resemble that of Fermac. "Open, in the name of the Five Wounds!"

"Who comes?" challenged the muffled voice of the warder.

"Son of a dog!" howled the monk, following up the epithet with a mouthfilling oath —and crossing himself the while, lest his soul take harm. "Offspring of toads! Do you not know your lord's voice? Open, lest I quarter you? We have the Black Thief!"

"Straightway, straightway, lord!" quavered the warder. "But I am alone here, and must be sure——"

A bar creaked back; another, and the gate swung open.

Instantly the monk leaped within, crashing his hilt into the warder's face. Before the man could cry out, his throat was seized in iron fingers and squeezed till his eyeballs started. Two men bound him neatly with his own belt, gagged him with strips from his tunic and dropped him by the door.

"Bar the gate!" Father Laurence panted. "So!"

Pikes lowered, swords ready, the six and thirty advanced. Their mail gleamed dully in the scanty light of the single cresset at the gate, then vanished in the pool of blackness that was the bailley. But ahead, where the tower loomed, a second cresset flung a broad lane of light. Toward this they made.

They had almost reached it, when the arriere-port of the keep was flung open and a man-at-arms reeled out into the torchlight. From behind him came the loud voices of men who had feasted more merrily than wisely. The man-at-arms made a weaving way toward the stables, as if to look to what few beasts remained there. He had reached the center of the patch of light—widened by the opening of the port—when one of the outlaws moved restlessly and his armor rattled.

The man-at-arms brought up short, peering owlishly into the dark bailley.

"Who is there?" he called, his voice thick with wine.

Out of the dark a bowstring hummed, and an arrow feathered itself in the man's breast. He dropped full in the ring of light with a crash of mail, and sprawled on his face in a pool of his own blood.

THE twang of string and thud of the shaft would have been enough to warn the handful in the keep. They ran to the door, but stopped in their tracks at the clang of the steelclad body on the stones. Some dragged their comrades back, while others hurled themselves at the door, hoping to close and bar it. Three or four drew sword or ran for their spears.

In three bounds Father Laurence reached the port and hurled his broad shoulders against it just as it swung to. His impact forced it open a little way; then, while he struggled to keep the men-at-arms from closing it enough to drop the bar, his men crashed after him. Just in time they flung their weight against the heavy wood. It burst wide open. Through the archway hurtled the advance-guard of the outlaws. Father Laurence was thrown so far by the sudden give of the port that he crashed full into a cluster of men-at-arms.

Two of them he bowled over; a third fetched a swing at him with shortened sword. Fortunately the wine in the man's veins made his eyesight poor; the steel missed the monk's neck and, turning, drew blood lightly from his left arm. Then the guardroom became a shambles.

The ten who remained of those Fermac had left on guard were in no posture for defense. Father Laurence turned his point on those he had flung to the floor; of the rest, four had been hurled against one wall by the rebound of the door; the others clustered in a forlorn heap, backs to the stair. The outlaws flooded the guardroom, beating the luckless soldiers back against the walls by sheer weight and tearing the lives out of them in the first onslaught.

Only two escaped—scrambling up the stair in frantic terror, seeking some hiding-place. Behind them raced Guitard and the black-clad men of the forest, pitiless. If the fugitives had the advantage of knowing the castle, their pursuers had the numbers and ferocity of the wolf-pack. The wine dying in their veins, loss of blood sapping their strength, the two hunted cover in the chambers above. There they were brought to bay, cowering in corners, and despatched.

"Clean up the blood, some of you!" Father Laurence commanded. "Guitard, see to the clearing away of the corpses. No time to bury them—take them to the battlements, and cover them up. Leave not a trace of struggle—see that all is as it was. You, Blaise, take four men and ransack the mail-chests. Eight of you run to the wood and fetch in the horses. Make haste!"

Having spoken, he bent to the mangled bodies of the men-at-arms, intent on offering spiritual consolation; but only three still breathed. To these he ministered as tenderly as if they had been his brethren.

His orders were carried out quickly and well. The warder was brought in from the postern and hidden away in the cells beneath the keep; the blood in bailley and guardroom was wiped up and fresh sand strewn on the floor. Mail was broken out and distributed to eleven men, selected as well as possible for their resemblance in build and stature to the slain defenders. The rest, still clad in the black livery of their outlawry, were taken to the living quarters. A search of the chambers revealed the muddy surcoat which Cercamon had worn when he first came to Belle Gard; and in this, his room, the black-mailed majority of the invaders were hidden.

Descending to the guardroom, Father Laurence set the eleven he had furnished with castle mail to overhaul the gear of gate and portcullis, that they might operate the winches promptly and without slip when the time came. When they had mastered the simple mechanism, he nodded curtly.

"We are ready now. Stay—we should have a warden at the postern. You go, Guillaume. Now, lads, here is wine, and food. Eat what you will; but if ye drink one drop, ye will have the blood of all of us—our lady's, too—on your heads! Leave the cups about—spill some on the floor. When the time comes, act as if ye were drunk—but leave wine alone!"

Guillaume, who had departed for the postern, raised a shout in the bailley. Running out, Father Laurence found him with his long arms about a tubby, cassocked figure. Close by stood a horse, its reins trailing.

"The chaplain!" exclaimed the monk. "I had forgot him. If he had won free, we should have been dead men ere another day. Bring him within!"

The little priest hung back, struggling gallantly, though his fat face was white with terror. When they had him within the keep, Father Laurence doffed his helmet, and thrust his own shaven poll in the chaplain's face.

"Monk slays not priest," he said shortly. "You are safe, butter-tub. Clap him in a cell, give him good food and wine, and set him to saying masses for the slain!"

TOWARD dusk Fermac wearied of the chase.

"By the halter of Judas!" he swore. "Never have I sweat so much since I fought in Syria. Where is the Black Thief, Troubadour? You promised me his whole band, and we have not seen so much as a single gallowsbird."

"Patience, good my lord," Cercamon answered. "I told you it would be a long hunt. The rascals are cunning, and on their own ground."

"By this time they have likely fled the county!" Fermac growled.

"How should they do that? You have the wood surrounded. They but lie close in some ravine or cave. We have only beaten the coverts. When you have drawn blank there, you will find the fox in his earth."

"Ay, but where, in the fiend's name, is his earth? Here we be, sixscore good men, and have not roused one bandit."

Cercamon had taken the lead, and took good care to direct the hunt as he thought best. As the baron's protests died down, he reined in, studied the thickets about them and pointed.

"There—to the left!"

"What?" snorted Fermac.

"A gap in the undergrowth—broken twigs."

He urged his gray into the opening.

"A deer-path!" Fermac grunted as they saw a narrow, deep-grooved way wind through a little glade.

"Not so—a man-path!"

Cercamon pointed again, and this time Fermac drew a deep breath.

"You are right. Hoof-marks. Lead on!"

Cercamon had knowingly swung back toward the point where they had entered the forest, and so cunningly had he confused the direction with back-casts and the search of side-openings that Fermac was not sure which way they headed. Taking his course from certain markings the monk had shown him as they came from the cavern the morning after he had left the Black Thief's lair—a tree with broken, hanging branch; a heap of stones, disposed apparently by accident—he had led the chase deliberately and surely toward the stream-pierced glen. Now he drew the man-hunters along the brink of its deepening channel till he knew the cave was not far distant.

"See how the way narrows!" he exclaimed. "It is bad work for horses here. The scroggy cliff there would make a rare lurking-place for archers. By your leave, my lord, I will go on alone and make sure the way is safe."

Weary, bathed in sweat beneath his mail, Fermac asked nothing better than a chance to rest.

"As you will," he agreed. "Be wary. If you meet danger, a call will bring us up."

Cercamon pressed on ahead, while Fermac and his archers dismounted in the glade and sprawled out on the soft grass. The horses began to crop contentedly. Only half a dozen pickets, posted on each side and in the path, kept careful watch.

Riding at an even, wary pace, Cercamon followed the narrowing path till he came out on the bridge. It lay in place, with the dark awning of the cavern barely showing beyond it through the screen of trees. Halting, Cercamon whistled softly.

A helmeted head thrust out.

"Ready, Sir Simon!" the troubadóur called; and the outlaw knight vanished into the cave.

Almost at once he came forth again, leading his horse across the bridge. Three others followed him; and last of all, clad still in her black armor, came the lady Marguerite. Here eyes were tired, for excitement had not let her sleep.

"Is all well, Cercamon?" she asked.

"It should be, my lady, if Father Laurence has not forgot how to lead men since he turned monk. Fermac and his fellows are in this wood, running to and fro and sniffing like hounds at fault. Now is the time to steal away, but it will be hard to pass them. Follow me!"

The girl mounted and followed, the four of her bodyguard trailing behind. They rode on cautiously, in utter silence, lest the searching men-at-arms hear them. As they neared the little glade, Cercamon reined in, signing the others to stop, and peered through the screen of foliage.

Voices came to them, half drowned by the din of the stream. A distant horse winded their animals and neighed. Marguerite's mount answered. One of Fermac's outposts rode out, his horse's head thrusting into the path.

Turning a startled face over his shoulder, Cercamon cried:

"Flee! They are close! To the cave!"

The outlaws wheeled and dashed back as they had come, Marguerite and the troubadour bringing up the rear. Cercamon's sword was out. As the four bandits galloped around a turn of the trail, past which they could neither see nor be seen, Cercamon suddenly snatched at Marguerite's rein and forced her to a halt. Before she could comprehend, much less struggle, he swung her from the saddle and set her in front of him. His strong hands holding her there, he galloped back toward the glade. Shouts and the clang of arms rang before them.

Marguerite, astounded and in despair, strove to beat at him with her hands, to snatch the reins. But Cercamon held her in an iron grip.

"Trust me!" he cried in her ear. "Trust me, though I seem to betray you! And speak no word, however they may revile you."

They burst into the mouth of the glade

and almost ran into the bunched column of archers that had sprung to the saddle at the alarm raised by their outpost. At sight of the sudden apparition—the mailed rider, clasping a struggling figure in black armor—Fermac pressed forward with a shout.

"The Black Thief!" Cercamon cried. "I bring you the Black Thief, Fermac!"

The baron's red face grinned with ferocious triumph.

"The Thief indeed!" he rejoiced. "Or one of his chief officers at least."

"Nay, the Thief himself," Cercamon insisted, holding the girl close in both his great arms. She was struggling like a wildcat. "See the quality of his mail!"

In her shapeless hauberk and swathing cloak, her hair and features hidden by the nasaled and curtained helmet, Marguerite easily passed for a slender man. Fermac drew back a huge palm to strike her; but Cercamon waved him back.

"The Thief is my prisoner, Sir Gaston," he protested. "It were ill done to lay hands on him till we get him safely within Belle Gard. There we can determine what to do with him. I found him lying close among the trees."

"Alone?" questioned the baron.

"There was none other there when I seized him," Cercamon answered, hoping that the four outlaws had been screened from the outpost's sight by the turn of the path. "Now we had best get him back quickly, lest his men find some means of effecting a rescue."

The outpost held his peace, and Cercamon sighed with relief. Fermac nodded assent, merely drawing Marguerite's sword from its scabbard. There was no need to bind her, for she had collapsed, exhausted, in her captor's arms. He wound her arms close in her surcoat, lest she regain strength to struggle. Though she lay limp, her eyes glared at him, and he knew the bitterness in her heart. Well she understood the hopelessness of escape; the man who held her had muscles of iron; before and behind, the riders of Fermac had closed in. She knew, if Fermac did not, that of all her men only the four who had escaped were now in the forest. Those four would not have known of her betrayal till they reached the cave and missed her; then it would be too late. There would be nothing for them to do but hide and drag the bridge in after them. They, at least, were safe.

Cercamon called out directions to Fermac and Sir Marc, just ahead; and the word was passed on to the archers. Straight for the forest-edge and the highroad they made, and shortly after dark they scrambled down to it. There Cercamon called a halt.

"It were unwise to give up the hunt for the band so soon," he advised. "We have the leader, but there must be desperate fellows among them who will keep together and plot revenge. When we have crossed the fields, my lord, it were best to send back the archers, to renew the search."

"But the Thief—" Fermac began.

"You and Sir Marc and I are men enough to get the Thief safely into Belle Gard. All your men will be needed here in the forest, if you are to hunt down and crush these outlaws forever. I would not be discourteous, my lord; but I bid you remember you are acting under commission from your master and mine, the Duke of Normandy. It is his will that the Black Thief's brigandage be ended. If your slackness lets his rascals escape, you must answer for it to the duke. I desire to see the affair ended in such a way that I may bring back a good report of you to him."

Fermac cursed; but for all his bluster and pride he was not anxious to draw down the duke's wrath.

"Splendor of heaven!" he growled. "Is it not as much to my interest as to the duke's that these *pouraille* should all dance on a rope? Be it as you will—but let us first ride to the foot of Belle Gard, lest by some cursed trick the dogs slip out and fall on us!"

So the troop urged their weary beasts across the fields and to the base of the castle hill. It was dark; and though the clank of their armor rang loud to the rise and fall of the horses, they were lost in a sea of night, out of which the lights of the keep shone as shore-beacons.

"Now send the men back, my lord," Cercamon insisted. "They have provisions. By night the outlaws have twice the chance to escape that they have by day. Having lost their chief, whose cunning enabled them to evade you, they should fall an easy prey if your officers press the search."

Weary as Fermac was, it suited his mood to let his men finish the work; and the capture of the Thief had given him fresh confidence of the outcome.

"Your advice is good," he grunted. "You have done well by me thus far. Praise the

Saints, but you are a shrewd man, thus to take, without help, him who is worth all the rest!"

He ordered the archers back to the forest. Unwillingly they obeyed, with the ease and comfort of Belle Gard so close; but they knew their master too well to protest. Once out of earshot, they took out their discontent in railing against the troubadour.

As they ascended the castle road, Cercamon bent down in the dark to whisper in his captive's ear:

"Trust me now more than ever, lady. The men in the castle are your own. You must contrive to make some sign to them; for otherwise the sight of you, a prisoner, will rouse them to fury. It will wreck my schemes, and imperil you, if they strike too soon!"

His anxiety had mounted to the point where all his self-command was needed to compose his features. Playing for more than the mere defeat of Fermac, he greatly feared what might happen if the monk had taken the castle as they had planned and misunderstood that part of the plan which Cercamon had not confided to him.

The three men with their prisoner halted at the great gate, exhausted, stiff-limbed, while Fermac sounded his horn.

"Who comes?" rang the challenge.

"I—Fermac, ye pigs!" the baron growled. "Open—I am weary!"

THE gate screamed on its hinges, in sorry tune with the screech of the portcullis in its wooden slides. The three horses clattered across the flags; gate and portcullis closed. Fermac scarce glanced at the handful of men-at-arms in the guardroom; though they started forward, muttering fiercely, at sight of the captive. Cercamon felt their eyes boring into him, and saw smouldering fire in their glances.

"Now, lady!" he breathed to Marguerite. "They are your men—and Fermac in their power. Give them a sign!"

As he dismounted with his prisoner, one or two of the garrison advanced, hands edging toward their hilts. Fermac heard and saw, but took their emotion as a demonstration against the captured Thief, who had often slain his stragglers. Bending over Marguerite the better to hide his hands, Cercamon made swift gestures at them. He pointed up once; then, with two rapid motions, he indicated Fermac and Marc. A shrug of his shoulders toward the gate tried to convey the understanding that all Fermac's men were left behind; then, with both hands, he motioned the seeming men-at-arms to stand aside. Meantime—praying that Father Laurence had indeed taken the castle and that these were his men, for their armor hid their features—he felt danger and failure very close.

Fermac caught his last gesture.

"What now?" he grumbled.

"Your lads would have laid rough hands on our prisoner," he answered. "I warned them off."

Marguerite turned her head wearily, to stare Cercamon full in the eyes; then she turned to scan the men-at-arms. Recognizing that in Cercamon's truthfulness lay her one chance of life, she took that chance. She nodded once, almost imperceptibly, to the men in mail and, freeing one hand, laid it on Cercamon's arm. The men's eyes flashed recognition; one of them raised a hand and passed it along his steel-masked nose. Cercamon drew a deep breath as he saw the signal; for it meant that the men, too, understood—at least enough to let him carry his game a little further toward its end.

Fermac, as if he felt the men's grim glances at his broad back, wheeled about.

"Well?" he barked from the stair. "Bring him up, Troubadour. Follow, Gui—you too, Reinard. Why in Lucifer's name do ye tarry?"

Picking the girl up bodily, Cercamon mounted the stair. Two of the men, starting tardily as they realized the roles they must play, followed. Cercamon's back still prickled; he was not yet sure the men understood enough to know that he had not played falsely with them. He was somewhat consoled, however, at the assurance that these were truly Marguerite's men. This was plain, though they wore castle mail—plain from their start toward him when they recognized the captive; plainer from their response to her signs. But if they mistook his purpose now, his first warning of their error would be a foot of steel in the back.

But he reached the stairhead safely and entered the hall behind Fermac and de Lot. The two mailed men halted at the door, standing guard one on each side.

Fermac stalked on to the daïs and flung

himself down in his great chair as one who means to deal out justice; yet he sprawled in a weariness that lacked all dignity. He turned his great head toward the kitchens.

"Ho, there!" he bawled. "Hot meat! Wine!"

A sleepy varlet thrust his tousled head through the door.

"Eh?" he yawned; and then, his face blanching, "My lord! What—food and wine? Of a surety, my lord!"

He vanished, trembling, and there rose the protests of wakened servants. A great bustling followed; the crackle of fires, and the smell of meat.

Fermac sprawled back in his seat, yawning cavernously. De Lot and Cercamon waited, as they must needs do, for the master of the castle to act. But Fermac had no thought of anything but food; and he was determined to eat before dealing with his prisoner. So all abided his will; Cercamon and Sir Marc impassive, Marguerite with white, set face and questioning eyes, and the men on guard at the door with a grimness of posture and a thrust of the jaw that boded ill for some one.

At last, as the servants scurried in with food, Cercamon rose.

"Give me leave but for a moment, my lord," he spoke. "And pray you, proceed not against the prisoner till I return."

Fermac nodded. Cercamon made his way to the door, where the two on guard stiffened suddenly, eyes doubtful, hands creeping toward hilts.

"Steady!" Cercamon whispered. "I go to inform the monk."

"He knows," one muttered back. "Play no tricks on us, Troubadour!"

"Tricks, fool?" Cercamon answered softly. "They are but two, and ye many. Be wise—stir not till I give the signal. There is more to this than ye guess."

They fell back to let him pass. Crossing to his chamber, he entered, closing the door behind him.

The room was packed with black-mailed men, who closed in about him, silently. Father Laurence, stalwart above the rest, faced him with suspicious eyes.

"What treachery is this?" he demanded. "You bid my lady stay behind till we have won the place for her; then you bring her here a captive. Men ride behind you—we heard them approach—then ride away again. If you have plotted to betray us to Fermac's spears, you shall not live to see them enter!"

Cercamon regarded him calmly.

"I could not tell you all," he replied, "else you would not have consented to my plan. Nor can I tell you yet. I pledge you my word that she is safe. When I go out, do you and your men steal into the corridor and wait at the hall door. There are none of Fermac's men nearer than the forest; you hold the castle, and only Fermac and de Lot are here to oppose you. When I call, or you hear the clash of steel, enter—but do not interfere with any save as I bid."

Father Laurence eyed him steadily.

"I do not understand," he said; "but what you say is true. We do hold the place. I see not how you can betray us. Eight men are below, holding the gate; there are five on the parapet."

Cercamon turned his back and went to the hall.

Fermac and de Lot were eating; but Marguerite sat where she had been placed, and there was no food before her. Cercamon turned to his host with a courteous gesture; but there was an angry glint in his gray-green eyes.

"Does not a thief eat, my lord?" he asked.

Fermac laughed gustily.

"This one does not. What use? He will grace my gallows tomorrow."

"Then let him eat, that the birds may have fatter pickings," he retorted.

The idea amused Fermac, and he bade the servants set food before the captive. As the troubadour hoped, she had wit enough not to remove the disguising helmet, though it impeded her eating somewhat. She took little food, glancing at Cercamon between listless bites. He fell to with lusty appetite.

When all had finished, and the cups were refilled, Fermac rose, raising his beaker.

"To you, Troubadour!" he spoke, his voice full and merry again. "To you, who have given my enemy into my hands! You are indeed cunning, as men call you. Ha, Black Thief! No more shall you rob my baggage-trains! A day or two, and all your band shall swing from my merlons, as you shall swing tomorrow!"

Cercamon moved toward the prisoner and laid one hand on her shoulder.

"By your leave, Sir Gaston," he said, and there was a new ring of authority in his voice, "the Black Thief is not yours to hang. I was sent by Duke Henry to kill or capture him; you but acted under my orders. You have seen my commission, and know that I speak truth."

Marguerite raised her eyes to the troubadour; they were bitter again, and so scornful that he would have turned aside. Her lips, moving softly, barely framed the words:

"You bade me trust you! Now you confess you were sent against me. You have betrayed me from the first!"

"Peace!" he whispered back. "Your own men guard you."

Their speech did not escape Fermac.

"What means this?" he cried suspiciously. "You will not let me hang him? You whisper with him? By St. Peter's sword, you plot to save him!"

Cercamon reached out and snatched off Marguerite's helmet. Her long hair, loosely coiled, fell about her face; her fair features were revealed.

"A woman!" Fermac cried.

He sprang from the daïs, seized a torch and strode to her.

"Death of my life! Marguerite de Belle Gard!"

* * *

HE STOOD like one turned to stone, staring at her, helpless to speak. The girl's eyes blazed hate at him. Cercamon watched them a moment, then let his glance drift to Marc de Lot. The young knight hunched forward in his chair, his strong face rigid with astonished emotion.

"Will you hang the Black Thief now, Fermac?" Cercamon asked silkily.

Mastering his confusion, the baron answered:

"Since the Thief is none other than Dame Marguerite—and you know of it, though I understand not how—I will spare her life on one condition. She shall either marry me, as I once asked her to, or grace my gibbet!"

Marc de Lot sprang to his feet.

"No!" he cried. "This is unknightly! Thief or no thief, she is a woman, and of gentle blood. You can not hang her—it were the deed of a devil! Nor can any man of honor force a girl to wed him under threat of death!"

Cercamon, leaning against the table by the girl's side, smiled at him.

"You are the man I hoped to find you, Marc," he said. "He is right, Fermac. Having no right of high, low, and middle justice, you can not doom to death one of gentle blood, nor one not subject to you. You and she are both vassals to the Duke of Normandy, who alone can judge between you. You shall neither hang her nor marry her."

Fermac wheeled on him with blazing eyes.

"You are in league with her!" he shouted. "In league with a bandit! Though the duke were twenty times my liege lord, neither you nor he shall interfere with my will! Her lands are mine, my lawful grant. She shall either confirm my right to them by giving me her hand, or she shall die, and be henceforth out of my way!"

The two guards at the door moved forward tensely; but Cercamon shook his head. Understanding at last the role he played, they obeyed his signal.

"Her lands are yours by right of murder, Fermac!" he spoke softly, and though he moved not, his muscles set for a swift spring. "You slew her father, an old man and sick, in his bed; you took his castle by the foulest treachery!"

Fermac, beside himself with rage, cast aside all caution.

"However I took it, I hold it!" he bellowed. "You have played me false, Troubadour, and you shall pay. Guards! Seize him!"

The two at the door laughed mockingly. Their defiance told Fermac that he was outwitted, though he mistook the manner.

"You have bribed my men!" he roared. "Hold them off, Marc!" Whipping out his sword, he rushed at Cercamon.

De Lot threw himself between them, even as Cercamon's hand shot to his hilt.

"My uncle!" the young man cried, his face ghastly. "Is it truth he speaks? Did you murder Jaufre de Belle Gard? When I came to you two years since I heard this tale and flogged a peasant for spreading it. You told me Jaufre died in fair fight, sword in hand. Was it false? Have I given my service and love to a dastard?"

Fermac struck at him with clenched fist.

"Out of my way, squeamish fool! What matters it to you what means I took, so that I won to power? Are you a woman, to blanch at a man's deeds? Curse you, get hence, and let me deal with this rascally minstrel!"

"Ay, do you get hence, Marc," Cercamon urged. "He had insulted me, threatened me—and I must answer him. Clear the way, lad!"

With a full-arm heave he shot the young man crashing against the daïs. Leaping back from Fermac's instant thrust, he flashed out his blade and struck in one swift motion. Steel clanged on steel, as the two men hacked and lunged, both shieldless, both resolute to kill.

Fermac's rush had brought his back to the door and the two on guard there. They had drawn steel, and strained like hounds on the leash.

"In, ye two!" Marguerite cried at them. "Seize him!"

The disguised outlaws leaped to do her bidding; but on their very heels the door burst open, vomiting black-mailed men. Marc de Lot, his own sword drawn, faced the two who ran against Fermac.

"Hands off!" he ordered.

His mind was awhirl with consternation that these two, whom he took for his uncle's men, should obey the girl's bidding; but, though the inrush of the outlaws enlightened him in terrible fashion, surprize did not blunt his wits nor stay his hand. A second more, and he would have been at blows with them.

"Down arms, lads!" rang the bell-like voice of Father Laurence. "Ye fools, this is a private quarrel! Your lady is safe!" Leaping past de Lot's weapon, he sprang with buffeting hands at the two pretended men-at-arms. They whirled; but recognizing him, they sheathed weapons.

With a few sharp commands, he brought his men to heel, marshalled them about Marguerite, and waited, his fine eyes following the duel with unfeigned ardor. Marc, gasping at sight of the black surcoats, stood helpless to one side. Uncertain what to do against so many, his sense of right and justice wounded by the sudden knowledge of his uncle's baseness, he could fight on neither side. Nor was there any fight to join just then, save for the lashing duel between Fermac and the troubadour.

Those two were now at the very daïs, exchanging blows so fast that the steel flashed like incessant lightning, and the clangor of steel on steel almost deafened the ears. His whole soul bent on killing the man who had thwarted him, Fermac had neither eyes nor ears for the inrush of the outlaws. If he heard them at all, he took them for his own men from the guardroom. His blazing eyes were fixed on Cercamon's; his mind and arm were given wholly to his sword.

Cercamon fought coolly, but with every ounce of strength and nerve. Fermac was not a foe to be played with. A giant in strength, he was also a born swordsman, trained in many battles. The pair were well-matched: Fermac's greater height was balanced by the troubadour's amazing length of arm; what Cercamon lacked in weight he gained in the power of his huge shoulders; such advantage as lay in his thrice-polished skill he lost to Fermac's desperate fury.

Slowly Cercamon gave ground, setting his feet daintily, like a cat's; and Marguerite bit her lip deep as she saw him retreat. His parries seemed to lack force, and they who watched were certain that the strength ebbed from his arms. Yet his thrusts were as fierce as ever when his edge descended, Fermac's upflung blade took them with a grinding clash that portrayed the fury of the strokes. The baron followed his advantage hard, taking every inch of ground his adversary yielded, leaping in with stroke and stab that Cercamon seemed scarce to evade.

Yet, even as he gave way, Cercamon began to smile. Fermac's slashes slithered from his sloping guard as surely as if he had wasted more strength in meeting them; Fermac's breast was beginning to heave. A sudden snake-like thrust opened the mail above the baron's thigh and drew a thin stream of red.

Maddened by the pain, Fermac flailed in with a backstroke so terrible that the staring beholders thought to see Cercamon cut half in two and Marguerite gave a piercing shriek of fear. But Cercamon had leaped from under the descending blade, which bit the edge of the daïs, and he recovered even as Fermac wrenched his point from the wood. In and out, out and in licked the troubadour's point, swifter than eye could follow; and Fermac was forced to give ground in his turn.

A little patch above his breast was reddening; his breath came in sobs. Cercamon, his lips humming a song, pressed the giant back and back, his blade weaving a flickering circle before the baron's eyes. He feinted with the point, drew Fermac's guard and leaped in with a swift cross-slash from the elbow. Fermac crashed to the floor, his throat torn half in two.

Marguerite gave a deep sigh and fell forward over the table. De Lot stood rigid, horror in his eyes. Even as the outlaws raised a hoarse cheer, the monk turned on them.

"To the battlements, you! No man knows how soon the avengers will be here!"

They fled; and he bent over Marguerite. She had not fainted, as he thought; but her shoulders heaved with sobs. She looked up at the monk's touch.

"I thought him a traitor!" she groaned. "Mercy of Heaven, I thought him a traitor!"

"So did I, for a moment," Father Laurence answered. "I do not understand him now. He is a man, that troubadour."

SIR GUITARD, down from the tower, reported the plain empty in the gray light of dawn.

"Fermac's hounds still hunt the coverts, then," Father Laurence muttered. "We are safe for a little longer."

None had gone to bed that night; the thrill and horror of what had befallen, and the peril from Fermac's absent garrison, forbade thought of sleep.

Cercamon had drawn Sir Marc into one corner of the hall, and was speaking to him earnestly.

"It would have come to this, or worse," the troubadour urged. "He was an evil man; you would have come to dishonor in his service. Look you: You can not fight me, for I killed him in fair combat. It was a base thing he meant to do with the girl."

De Lot faced him at last.

"You are right," he said dully. "He deserved his fate, and you have righted a great wrong. But—he was my mother's brother!"

"I knew it, lad," Cercamon answered kindly. "For your sake, and for naught else, I gave him his chance. When I asked him if he would hang a woman, I hoped he would say no. Had he given way then, I would have held off yonder black-coats, and taken him with Lady Marguerite to Duke Henry, who would have judged fairly between them. I meant even to ask the duke to pardon him, on condition that he restore her lands. But he showed himself vile, so that there was naught to do save slay him."

He had turned as he spoke, so that his words reached Marguerite.

"It was for this," she exclaimed, "that you feigned to deliver me into Fermac's hands? That he might have his chance to show mercy?"

Cercamon shot her an amused glance.

"Nay, not that. That was to satisfy my honor. I promised you to win back your castle for you; and I have done it. But to help you I had first to gain Fermac's confidence; and to that end I was forced to promise him that I would deliver the Black Thief into his hands. Also I had bound myself to Duke Henry to capture or slay the Black Thief. I have now fulfilled all three promises.

"But under Fermac's roof I met young Marc here, who is a man and a cavalier. So, hoping to spare him sorrow, I resolved to let Fermac show his chivalry, if he had any. For this reason I revealed your face to him. He disappointed me."

Sir Marc raised his unhappy eyes.

"You have acted like the gentleman all men take you for," he said. "It can not even be said that you betrayed my uncle's hospitality; for the very food and wine he gave you, the roof that sheltered you, he had falsely stolen from Lady Marguerite. To me you have been generous indeed. But——"

"But the earth has crumbled beneath your feet," Cercamon interposed not unkindly. "You have found your kinsman wanting in honor, have seen him slain, and your service bloodily ended. You know not what to do with your life. Come, I——"

Marguerite, on impulse, interrupted.

"There is still a home for you at Belle Gard, Sir Marc!" she cried warmly. "I have no quarrel with you, who have done me no wrong. Take service under my pennon!"

"Lady!" cried Marc, his eyes blazing. "After all, yon dead dog was of my blood!"

Marguerite flushed, stammering regrets.

His own back turned full on the embarrassed girl, Cercamon drew de Lot aside.

"Lad," he pleaded, "can you take my hand, for all the blood on it?"

"Why not?" Marc answered. "You are such a man as I have prayed to be!"

His hand gripped Cercamon's hard.

"Then ride with me to Caen!" the other urged. "Take service with my master the duke, who loves men with strong arms and clean hearts. Is he not your overlord?

Proud will I be to ride with such a comrade!"

For a space Marc answered not; then, with dragging steps, he walked to the covered corpse of Fermac. Long he looked down on it, tears gathering in his eyes.

"I will empty my purse in masses for his soul!" he said at length. "And—aye—I will go with you!"

Mailed feet clanged suddenly on the stair and hammered on the landing. As all turned toward the door, Guitard rushed in.

"Horsemen on the plain!" he shouted. "Fermac's men!"

"To the wall!" Father Laurence ordered. "Troubadour, will you hold the gate?"

Cercamon laughed.

"No need!" he answered. "Trust to me—and to Marc de Lot. Come, comrade!"

He led the way down the stair, and sent two men from the guardroom for horses. Once mounted, with de Lot in the saddle beside him, he bade the gate be opened.

"You will confirm what I say?" he asked; and as the grind of the portcullis drowned all words, de Lot nodded.

The outlaws in the guardroom stared after them and would have left the gate open against their return; but Cercamon shouted back that they must close up swiftly. Afraid for him, but more for themselves and their lady, they obeyed.

Cercamon pointed down across the plain. Jogging forward through the sea of wheat came a weary procession. Spearmen, archers, worn to the bone with two nights and a day of sleepless toil, rode weary nags back from their fruitless search for the Black Thief's band. Horses and riders came on in disarray, heads down, spear-points weaving drunkenly in the morning light.

"There is no fight left in them!" laughed Cercamon.

He pricked the gray forward, down the twisting castle road, and Marc held even with him. They met the riders well out in the fields. Halting his men at sight of them, one of the knight-officers advanced, scarce able to hold his crest aloft.

"We have found—nothing!" he croaked.

"We have found much!" Cercamon answered. "To make all short, we have found you masterless. Fermac is dead."

"Dead!" gasped the knight; and "Dead?" echoed up and down the startled column.

All eyes stared at the herald of misfortune who but twelve hours since had ridden forth with them and their lord.

"Aye, dead. The Lady Marguerite rules in Belle Gard. In the name of Henry, Duke of Normandy, Brittany and Anjou, lord of Maine, Touraine, Poitou and Gascony, I command you to keep the duke's peace and ride hence without disturbance!"

The officer stared at him in dull anger, while the men-at-arms exchanged startled looks and questions.

"What jest is this?" the knight blazed.

"No jest, but grim earnest, if you disobey! Here is my warrant from the duke—read it if you will. Ye are his subjects, and a gallows waits the man who disregards the commands I lay on you in his name. Sir Marc—whom ye know, and whose orders ye have taken—will vouch for my word."

"It is as he says," de Lot assented. "Your master is dead, and ye will do well to heed Cercamon's word. Otherwise I myself will give you your dismissal, and the duke's hand will rest heavy on your heads. Go—Belle Gard has no more need of you!"

A murmur rose among the men—mercenaries all.

"Our pay! Who gives us our wages?"

"Take the mail on your backs, and your horses, for pay!" Marc answered. "They are worth more than a year's wages!"

Only a moment they hesitated; then, as with one accord, the men-at-arms wheeled about and rode wearily toward the highway. They were indeed overpaid; nor was there any other course open.

The knight alone stood his ground.

"How did my master die?" he asked hotly. "How come ye safe from the fate that destroyed him, ye two?"

De Lot frowned, but Cercamon found speech before him.

"If you think that your concern," he answered smoothly, "I, who slew your master, will do as much for you!"

The knight looked once into the glowing blue-green eyes, whirled his charger and spurred the beast into a reeling gallop.

"Now, lad!" Cercamon cried gaily, "for Normandy!"

"But—but—" de Lot protested. "They wait us in the castle—we have not said farewell!"

He pointed back to the keep, where a slender figure in black stood upon the battlements, against the golden background of the new day.

"Bah!" cried Cercamon. "I like not to be thanked. Forward!"

The CAMP-FIRE

A MEETING-PLACE for READERS, WRITERS and ADVENTURERS

Our Camp-Fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. Some whose voices we used to know have taken the Long Trail and are heard no more, but they are still memories among us, and new voices are heard, and welcomed.

We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance. The *spirit* of adventure lives in all men; the rest is chance.

But something besides a common interest holds us together. Somehow a real comradeship has grown up among us. Men can not thus meet and talk together without growing into friendlier relations; many a time does one of us come to the rest for facts and guidance; many a close personal friendship has our Camp-Fire built up between two men who had never met; often has it proved an open sesame between strangers in a far land.

Perhaps our Camp-Fire is even a little more. Perhaps it is a bit of leaven working gently among those of different station toward the fuller and more human understanding and sympathy that will some day bring to man the real democracy and brotherhood he seeks. Few indeed are the agencies that bring together on a friendly footing so many and such great extremes as here. And we are numbered by the hundred thousand now.

If you are come to our Camp-Fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There is no obligation except ordinary manliness, no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.

THIS comrade lays the Hawaiian *Ki* or *Ti* down beside Gordon MacCreagh's South American *Caapi* on the chance that it may be the same or a similar thing. We'll hope to hear from Mr. MacCreagh later.

Headquarters 101st Division, U. S. A.,
(Organized Reserve)
Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

I have read with much interest the two articles by Mr. MacCreagh on the strange South American drink which he refers to as "Caapi."

This is the first time I have "busted into" Camp-Fire's sacred precincts, although I did get you to put me in touch with Captain Fritz Dusquene, while I was in Alaska, in 1912 or 1913. I have, however read every number of the magazine since you first made your bow to the compadres of *Adventure*, barring a few copies I missed while in Siberia (A.E.F.). Have read it in China, Hawaii, Japan, Philippines, Mexico, Alaska and a few other places.

I AM not trying to give an opinion on this matter, but I thought, and hoped, that perhaps what I have to say might be of interest to Mr. MacCreagh, and that he might be able to follow the "clew," if such it proves to be.

I was, for many years, in Hawaii, as a Regular Army non-com, as an officer during the early part of the War, and as a civilian. I have served on the various islands as a National Guard Instructor and have a large and valued (by me at least) acquaintance among the Hawaiian folk.

There grows in Hawaii a plant known as "Ki" (Kee); the Samoan term is usually used, *i.e.* "Ti" (Tee). I may add that the Hawaiian alphabet has no letter "T" but that the Samoan "T" is often used in some parts, in place of the Hawaiian "K". The leaves of this plant are used to wrap food in before cooking, and for medicinal purposes, while from the root is made a potent liquor.

I HAVE been told that this plant was put to ceremonial uses in the days before Christianity in Hawaii, by the ancient Kahunas, or priests, of the Heians dedicated to the old gods of Hawaii. I know that native boys even now (I worked at a school over there) used to think that if they bothered the bones in the old burial caves the Akua (Spirit) would choke them and when they were naughty this way, used to take "Ti" leaves to their dormitories chewing the root to spit in the spirit's face and scattering the leaves about. All this to show possible ceremonial use as in the case of the South American "Caapi." The drink itself acts (or did on me) very much as did "Caapi" on Mr. MacCreagh. It answers the general description he gives, *i.e.* amber colored, although I have seen it nearly white.

I would not call it "narcotic" at all, but would say "intoxicating." I do not know that the warriors of old used it, although I have been a close student of misty Hawaiian traditions (now unfortunately being forgotten).

However, could it be that this is one and the same drink? I am interested and would like to hear more of this "Caapi." Dr. Koch's name "Kapi," by the way, is very good Hawaiian, and I have found words in other lands which were good Hawaiian. (I do not mean that Kapi means the same as "Caapi.")

If this is of interest, I am very glad, if not, no harm done. Please refer this to Mr. MacCreagh. With, *Aloha pau ol'e.*—Harry R. Brown.

P.S. I do not intend to say that the Hawaiian race do hold, as a race, the superstition I have referred to above. I referred to boys, and those not of the best types. I used that reference because I have found here in America that many of the superstitions of my childhood, and of my fellows, were really "hang-overs" from an earlier period. The Hawaiian people, as a race, are as well educated and as well civilized (oh what an abused word!) as any other "Americans." (They are full citizens and not members of a possession, you know.) I would hate to add another to the large list of foolish ideas generally held in this country regarding Hawaii, *i.e.* grass skirts, grass huts, etc.—H. R. B.

* * *

TO AN appeal of this kind I know from experience that there will be generous response. Almost every historical story we have published of late years has brought its author interesting comments and information from some of you. Often the information has been invaluable, coming from sources not available to historians, throwing new light on facts or bringing to light facts thitherto practically unknown.

That is fine, but also it is a pity. For by that time the story, of course, is written and published and the new information can be used only when the story goes into book form. So I've been suggesting to some of our writers' brigade that, in the case of serials or novelettes involving historical material, particularly when the period is not so remote that all existing references are neatly cataloged in libraries, they appeal to you before the event instead of after it. All of them were interested and all believed this might bring them extremely valuable data, but none of them felt like "bothering" you with such a request—it seemed to them to be asking too much.

With all respect to our writers' brigade, after nearly fifteen years I feel I know you better than they do. The readers gathered about our Camp-Fire have unfailingly held out the helping hand to any comrade making any request within the bounds of reason—held it out for no other reason than that they wanted to. In this case you've been holding it out right along anyhow. It's merely a question of whether the information you contribute shall reach an author too late for use in his story or reach him in time to help him with it.

Well, at last Arthur D. Howden Smith has agreed to be the pioneer for his writing brethren and ask you for any information you feel like giving him while his story of William Walker is in the making. I'm pretty sure you'll be glad to have a hand in the building of that story if you have anything to contribute.

I am working on a novel which develops the various incidents of the Walker filibustering expeditions to Central America, and in furtherance of that work, which will ultimately be submitted for the judgment and criticism of the brethren of the Camp-Fire, I want to make an appeal to you all for any information you may possess as to the episodes in which Walker figured. And not only Walker, but any men, whether they were prominent or not, who served with him.

To save you trouble, I will add that I possess or have access to the accepted sources of filibuster material. What I am after here at the Camp-Fire is material which has escaped previous writers and historians. There must be a lot of it. First and last, nearly 2,500 men served under Walker, and from 10,000 to 20,000 Americans must have visited Nicaragua during his period of power down there. Most of these men wrote home or told tales before their own hearth fires. Such letters or tales are the warp and woof of which national traditions are woven. I am inclined to attach more importance to them than to the dry-as-dust facts of history and opinions rendered by men who lived long afterward. And if you fellow-members here can assist me with such material you may be sure of my gratitude, and perhaps incidentally, make it easier for me to divert you with the product of our joint labors.—Arthur D. Howden Smith.

* * *

THOUGH it is on the occasion of his second, not his first story in our magazine, Percy Charles Chandler follows Camp-Fire custom and rises to introduce himself:

Havana, Cuba.

To "cut the cackle and come to the 'osses," that being *pukka* Camp-Fire style:

I WAS born under the shadow of the golden Shwé Dagon pagoda, in Rangoon, Burmah, very shortly after the subjugation of the Burmese and the capture of the notorious King Theebaw in Mandalay. So very shortly after, in fact, that Burmah was still in a state of seething unrest, Sniders "squibbed in the jungle": (one of them killed my father, Lieut. C. E. Chandler, of the Artillery); many a police officer was assassinated in many a lonely post, and there were wars, alarums, excursions and sudden death enough to rattle even the British.

After losing two younger brothers in the same night by cholera, my mother and I decided that Burmah was not for us, and for eight subsequent years I was supposed to be studying at an English school. Thereafter entered the service of the Eastern Telegraph Company, put in three years at Gibraltar, had a good look at southern Spain and Morocco, saw Mazzantini and Bombita Chico—probably the most famous of all the matadors—kill their bulls in the rings of Linea and Algeciras, saw the bulls gut the horses, got horribly sick—either the wine or the blood, I don't know—and have nothing but loathing for this cruel "sport." Have been in the service of the submarine cable companies ever since with the exception of a short spell at railroading on the Guayaquil and Quito Railway, Ecuador.

AH, YES, there was one other interlude. On September 12, 1914, I enlisted "for the duration of the war" in the 13th battalion, Rifle Brigade, but the duration was short for me. It was very nice in Winchester—the feeling of irresponsibility, of glorious aloofness from paltry matters of business that one gets when in an army—in Winchester, where we had dry beds to sleep in; but the field training at Halton Camp, Buckinghamshire, in a wet English autumn soon searched out the malaria in this tropical tramp. I never saw any fighting, being discharged as a very sick man after two months service, to return to South America and the unromantic business of tapping keys.

I play the gramophone and the musical comb with ease, and my touch on the (cable) keys is as artistic, in its way, as that of any virtuoso of the piano. The cable service has, during the last twenty years, provided me with free passages to Spain, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, Nicaragua and latterly Cuba; and having found in this delectable island just the precise blend of climate, conditions, civilization and Scotch to suit me, here I stay until forcibly chucked out.

THOUGH my work is of necessity on the seaboard, cable stations being always on the coast, or very near it, I have made a point of nosing into the interiors of the various countries where the work has taken me. More especially Ecuador, roaming the desert-plains of western Guayas on horseback, taking a look at the whole country from Tulcan of the machete men in the north to Sig Sig in the south—Sig Sig, where the Indios stop you politely and firmly from further penetration of their country, but don't mind dropping into mass at the cathedral of a Sunday morning with their gold-dust contribution to the collection.

I was given to understand at Sig Sig that the good priests are doubtful as to whether the Indios have really taken religion. It was hinted darkly that their visits to the cathedral are not allowed to interfere with the joys of the inter-tribal scrap, or the subsequent pleasant business of reducing the heads of their enemies to a size where those trophies can be hung around the house without cluttering up the place too much. I do know that these reduced heads were a positive glut on the market in 1916, for sale at 50 *sucres* apiece in Quito and Guayaquil, about 20 dollars American at the rate of exchange then obtaining. There is nothing very repulsive about these heads. The ones I handled had the neck filled in with some sort of hard clay, the flesh was hard, and they were more like ordinary plaster heads than anything else, except that the thick jet-black head hair and the scanty eyebrows and insignificant moustache of the typical Indian were most wonderfully preserved. They are about one-third the size of an ordinary head, and therein lies the riddle: How are the skull, jaw and other bones reduced without scalp or skin being (apparently) disturbed?

And having brought this yarn to a head, so to speak, I squat down by the cheerful glow of the Camp-Fire. *Salud!*—PERCY C. CHANDLER.

A WORD from Captain Mansfield in connection with his story in this issue:

"Bung up and bilge free" is a nautical term used in reference to the stowage of barrels; to prevent leakage should the bung become loose, and to protect the bilge, or wide part of the barrel.—S. A. MANSFIELD.

A COMRADE'S letter concerning the MacBanes of Fred Halsey's article in a past issue. Another comrade has written challenging certain facts in that article, but "Fred Halsey" is a pen-name—one of the very, very few used by writers for this magazine—and his real identity makes it difficult for him to reply in "Camp-Fire" to this second letter. Instead, he is asking a friend, who has direct personal knowledge concerning the circumstances of Golice MacBane's death, to answer in his stead. We look forward to this letter and its reply at a future Camp-Fire. Meanwhile, here is the present case:

Chicago.

The following may be of some interest to the readers of Mr. Fred Halsey's story in *Adventure* for January 30, 1924, particularly those of Highland ancestry.

IN HIS story "The MacBane is Dead," I note he stated that Gillies or Golice MacBane, who was among those out in 1745 and whose exploit at Culloden was mentioned in his article, has remained unsung. This is a mistake.

I would refer him to MacIan's "Costumes of the Clans of the Scottish Highlands," published in 1845 by Ackerman and Co., Strand, London, Eng. On page 270 under the head of "The Clan Bhean" or "The MacBeans," he will find mention of one Gillies MacBean. Am giving you an excerpt of same, in part including the "Coronach" as follows:

"A Pathetic elegy, entitled "Mo run gealoig" or

"My fair young beloved," is said to have been composed by his disconsolate widow. Another composition in the English language on the same subject said to have been one of Byron's early effusions, appeared in a northern periodical."

"The clouds may pour down on Culloden's red plain,
But their waters shall flow o'er its crimson in vain,
For their drops shall seem few to the tears for the slain
But mine are for thee, my brave Gillies Mac Bain!"

If Mr. Halsey is anywhere within the environs of the Windy City, he has but to look me up and I will be pleased to show him a copy of "Mac Ian's Clans," and furthermore, if there is any survivor of Gillies MacBain still left in the State of Tennessee, I respectfully request that he express to "The MacBane" my very best regards, as being from a descendant of "The Red Mac Gregor of Glengyle," better known as Rob Roy, to the descendant of "Mac Bane."—A. E. J. G.

* * *

Will you thank Mr. —— for me? I did not realize what careless reporting that was until his letter and the verses re-awakened memories. Years ago, when a boy, our old neighbor on the farm, Archie McIndoo, used to sing that song, and not until Mr. Gardner sent the verses did I associate them with the MacBane, nor did either of his descendants I knew ever mention the verses.

Since writing the story I have a few further details about Gol's death and he seems to have remained true to the family tradition. He was running a coffee plantation and some of the Mexican Government forces interfered with his Indian laborers. I do not know the details, but MacBane got the idea his Indians were getting the worst of it, backed them up, and was shot in a skirmish, dying four days later. His insurrection appears to have been independent, although it occurred at a time when a general revolt was being attempted. He told me he had a brother Samuel, living in Memphis, but of any other connections I know nothing.

I feel a bit ashamed of myself, as a Scot, never having heard the ballade. Especially so as our family tradition is that two score of the tribe fell at Culloden, and those who survived went to the North of Ireland. There used to be a big painting in the family showing the battle on the moor, and right in the center of it was one of our family. We knew he was one of our family, as he was up a tree.—Fred Halsey.

* * *

SOMETHING from Arthur O. Friel concerning his serial that begins in this issue:

Once upon a time there were a couple of Shawangunk mountaineers—a wild lad called *Steve Oaks*, and a good old scout known as *Uncle Eb*—whom some of you may remember. Meet them again, brethren—a little older, but not much changed by the years—and, with them, a new chap called *Hard Wood*. Since *Hard* himself will show you just what kind of girl he is, I'll say no more about him here. And, in view of the fact that I talked at some length about the Traps in connection with "Cat-o'-Mountain," I won't repeat—except to say once more that the Traps is a real place.

YOU fellows who haven't forgotten *Uncle Eb* may be interested in the fact that he is still alive and, though he now is "goin' on" 77 years old, is a pretty husky old boy. In a way, I am committing an anachronism by putting him into a story of bygone times, and am compounding my felony by doing the same thing with *Bad Bill*, who, so far as I know, is still doing time in the pen. Oh, yes, the latter gent is real, too, only his name isn't Cooper. As I was saying, I have shoved these two very dissimilar men back quite a number of years in Traps history. But who cares? I'm not writing an historical novel, but spinning a yarn, and these fellows fit in. For that matter, I'm not saying that any of the events of this story ever really took place. Neither am I saying that they didn't.

The time is, of course, back in the days when both the Traps and the Big Indian country were alive, and not, as they now are, mere shells of their former selves; the days, too, when moonshining was considered a low occupation instead of the favorite indoor sport of most of our citizens. Enough said!—A. O. F.

* * *

FROM Edgar Young of "A.A." and our writers' brigade comes a letter from a comrade with Mr. Young's reply. Both have lain in our cache since 1921 and it is high time Mr. Young should be heard on the question he himself propounded to us of Camp-Fire long ago—"What is the spirit of adventure, biologically speaking?"

Pittsburgh.

Some time ago you brought up the question "What is the Spirit of Adventure" at Camp-Fire. I have been trying to answer that query but never to my own satisfaction, and nobody else's for that matter. But I would like your opinion on a little incident which happened some time ago. Close to twenty years ago to be exact.

I WAS at that time an ordinary seaman aboard an English ship the *Urmston Grange*, Holden Line, East India Docks, London, and we were loading cargo in Sydney, Australia, for the homeward trip to England and we were to stop in Punta Arenas, Straits of Magellan, for additional cargo and also in Ensenada, River Plate, for some more before making the final trip to London.

While in Sydney our first officer, a Scotchman named Philipps, shipped three beach-combers. They wanted to work their passage to Buenos Aires in the hope of doing better in South America than they could in Australia. As you might know, these traveling men never carry anything outside of what they happen to be wearing at the time and very little at that. We carried a big deck-load of coal which had to be shoveled into the bunkers as the voyage progressed, and any additional help was welcome.

Our three friends worked and sweated their way. Old man Philipps was no easy taskmaster and if anybody ever earned a passage, these three men did.

WE FINALLY hit the Straits and Punta Arenas. There was at that time an old dismantled sailing-ship anchored out in the Straits a mile or so from shore which was used as a refrigerator for frozen mutton and any ship desiring a cargo had to tie alongside and the mutton was passed from the old hulk into the other ship. It was cold work. You know how cold it is down there during the winter and we hit there in August. The crew of this refrigerator were a nondescript lot recruited from all parts of the world and about as hard boiled as you would find in a day's travel, but good fellows at that. Our thinly clad three international hoboes (excuse the expression. I don't mean any harm. I hoboed a lot myself) were right in their element and formed friendships with them right off the reel. They could tell of adventures, real or imaginary. But one note ran through all the stories. Gold. There was lots of it to the south. Every one knew of a gold-mine or a place where it lay around in plain sight ready for the picking up. I have since found out there is some gold there but not in paying quantities.

Well, our three friends decided right then and there to stay and they did. Now imagine three men in a strange country without any clothing or equipment of any kind suitable to the climate, with fireman's sweat-rags tied around their ears to keep them from freezing, without money or anything. Truly a desperate situation. But they were cheerful and ready to tackle the great adventure that lay before them. Mind you, they had the prospects of a nice warm country before them with a comparatively easy way of making a living, yet they chose to stay in the Straits of Magellan among a crowd of roughnecks and the cold and other discomforts too numerous to mention. Why? I don't know. Was it greed, curiosity or what? I give it up.

Have you ever heard of a circus performer in your travels by the name of Morrow? An Englishman, ex-navy officer and highly educated. Does a horizontal-bar act. I met him in Iquique but have lost track of him for some time. Heard he had a show of his own now. Wonder what became of him.—FRED ROYAL.

MY DEAR MR. ROYAL: I have read your letter with much interest. You said it about "the spirit of adventure" being a hard one. I got on to it a few years ago and got to tracing back. The further I went, the further I seemed to be able to go. I got into evolution and back into biology. It seemed to me that I almost placed it as the creative thought that precedes physical existence. This got me into theosophy and mysticism and I quit it for the time. Later I struck some of my own conclusions in a book by Prof. Eno of Princeton called "Activism." It was about the time I began having weird thoughts that I put the question before the readers of *Adventure*, hoping that some accidental genius among them would solve it. It is a very large question and to solve it a man would have to go into many branches of learning and when he did solve it, absolutely, he would have the key to the existence of all things, according to my notion.

MODERN anthropology has been able to trace all races back to one primitive man-ape somewhere in Asia. The craving for adventure scattered them to all parts of the world. This seems to solve something, but it don't. We find that about this point all apes began branching off from one primitive stock. This seems to get a man somewhere when he traces the quadrumana back to a primitive stock. But it don't. A man gets mixed up with the quadrupeds. He finds that all animal life comes from a primitive stock. And then yet further back he finds that all vegetable life came from the identical source the animal came from. Right there a man gets woozy-headed. Where did this gosh-all-fired-awful first life come from? From the mineral? From light? From energy? Was our planet formed by the meeting in mid-space of two sets of contrary headed rays of light? Eno of Princeton says it's all a form of activism which is the universal unit that all things can be yardsticked by. Herbert Spencer gave it up. Darwin gave it up. Prof. James gave it up. Flammarion gave it up. Hugh Elliot gave it up. But all the time we get nearer and nearer to the answer as we evolve brains. And the answer keeps moving back further and further away.

I can understand that the beach-combers you speak of did as they did. I have often done the same thing. But just why I did it and what this spirit of adventure was that made me do it is more than I can savvy.—EDGAR YOUNG.

* * *

FROM Larry Barretto a word in connection with his story in this issue:

All the incidents in this story actually happened to several men, with the exception of one. And while I did not know anybody who swam the Marne after the evacuation of this town I have been told that a number of French soldiers tried it—not all successfully. For the sake of the story the retreat and the evacuation of the town have been concentrated into two days rather than the three which elapsed. The German rush forward was incredibly rapid and villages were taken before the menace was realized. I believe that I am one of only thirty Americans—with the possible addition of a Y. M. C. A. man and a few officers—who witnessed the civilian evacuation of the town which was to become world famous a few weeks later as Château Thierry.—LARRY BARRETTO.

* * *

ONE of our stories brings forth criticism of its local color and we're glad to hear the case at Camp-Fire. Our writers usually know at first hand the fact material they use in our stories and have built up our magazine's reputation for reliability in such matters. But one of the biggest factors in earning that reputation has been the constant watchfulness of our readers.

Peter de Rodyenko, Inc.,
New York City.

I should like to draw your attention to some discrepancies in a story by Mr. H. C. Montee, which appeared in one of your recent issues and which dealt with the experiences of an American aviator with Chinese troops in China. I am a former resident of China, who for some time acted as military instructor to provincial troops in China.

THE expression "chop-chop" to indicate speed is confined to Canton and surroundings. In the provinces of Chih Li, Shang Tung, Hu Peh and other Northern districts "kwei-kwei" or "kwei-di" is used, while around and in Shanghai "o-sso" or "o-sso-ti" serves the same purpose.

SILVER eagles are not used in the Chinese army to designate the rank of colonel. Narrow shoulder straps, fastened vertically to the shoulder with stars take the place. The strap of a colonel shows three narrow strips of braid, separated by cloth in the color of the branch of the service. Red for infantry, etc. The two outer straps are made of gold braid, the center strap is silver. One star means major, two stars lieutenant-colonel, three stars colonel. Officers of a rank below major have two silver-strips with gold in the center. Captain three stars, Lieutenant two, Second Lieutenant one.

NO OFFICER has ever worn "plumes" and "glittering gold braid" when on active duty. The Chinese full-dress uniform is modeled after the Japanese, which in turn imitates the French. On campaign duty Chinese officers wear a khaki-uniform which is very similar to the U. S. uniform. It is a peculiar thing that most Chinese generals, when in command of troops on the front, wear civilian dress, very rarely khaki, and although I saw altogether several hundred Chinese generals on active duty I still have to look out for one who burdened himself with the cumbersome full-dress uniform.

CHINESE do not uncover when praying. Even Catholic Chinese don't as a rule. In the Orient, to be uncovered is a sign of disrespect. The uncovered head as a sign of respect is strictly Western and originated in the days when helmets were worn.

That a Chinese general should forget all his military duties in the eyes of the enemy to take his staff to the burial place of his ancestor to worship there is absurd. The Chinese is religious but not very churchly. In this country it is the other way round. Lots of churchliness and confoundedly little religion.

The Chinese are most decidedly *not* cowards. The Chinese soldier, under a fairly good leader is just as good a fighter as any other soldier. It is decidedly unfair of Mr. Montee to make fun of the Chinese soldiers without knowing them.

ALREADY in 1913 the Chinese used primitive hand-grenades. Hence the assertion of Mr. Montee that the Chinese soldiers ran away for miles when his hero begun to throw grenades is equally absurd.

Around the same time Chinese started to use bombing planes. They had not many but the men were familiar with them. To the Chinese soldier of the 20th Century things are not "inventions of the devil" as they were before and in the Boxer rebellion.

The Chinese have been much maligned because of their peacefulness and their philosophy of resignation and stoicism and I hope that in fairness to China and the Chinese you will print this letter in a conspicuous place.—PETER RODYENKO.

Following our usual custom in such cases Mr. de Rodyenko's letter was passed on to Mr. Montee so that he might speak in his own defense. His answer follows:

Mount Vernon, New York.

First off, and before anyone gets the other impression, I wish to disavow any claim to expert knowledge of China and things Chinese. My observations there were limited to those of an exceedingly busy newspaper correspondent who was sent over there from Japan only when there was some special "story" to be had, or when something had "broken" which looked as if it might contain a story warranting my news outfit spending the amount of money it took to get me there and back. My observations there were, I suppose, those of the ordinary traveler who has spent some little time (the matter of a few months all told) in that marvelous country.

In one point Mr. de Rodyenko and I are in hearty accord—that I, or almost any other Occidental, could learn a great deal from the Chinese. It certainly was no intention of mine in "The Silver Lining" to poke fun at the Chinese as a nation and race.

BUT I still fail to see how an Occidental can take too seriously some of the buffoonery that is labeled civil war in China. It is serious indeed, for the merchant whose shop is looted. In the long run it is serious for the Government in Peking which is unable to control some of the rapacious tuchuns who are a law unto themselves. It is serious for those who lose their lives, but few of the soldiers do lose their lives. The fighting seldom is serious enough for that. The battle maneuvers themselves are mere farce. Sometimes there is a quite general engagement, such as the recent fight around Shanghai, when quite a number were killed and wounded, but for the most part, during the past five years, at least, the warfare has consisted of bluff, feint and loot.

TO TAKE up specifically the points raised in Mr. de Rodyenko's letter:

The expression "chop-chop" was used, not as a Chinese word, but rather as the pidgin English which forms a *modus operandi* for communication between the Chinese "man in the street" and the foreigner. I have heard, and have used, "chop-chop" to the Chinese riksha coolie in ports from Kiaochow to Hong Kong, and it usually was productive of the desired result. It seemed to be the logical word to put into the Chinese orderly's mouth when he addressed Skinner.

Regarding Skinner's silver eagles: I am aware of the fact that the insigna of rank in the Chinese arm comprises the narrow shoulder straps worn vertically (similar to the Japanese, with which I am somewhat familiar). I thought I had sufficiently covered the point in the story by explaining that Skinner had obtained his eagles from an American colonel in Tientsin. (I had a friend who was aviation instructor to Chinese cadets and that is what he did.)

I WONDER if Mr. de Rodyenko has been among the rabble that makes up one of the "armies" of one of the tuchuns at war with the Central Government, where anything that may be had is worn, whether it be uniform or civilian clothing; rags or broadcloth; cast-off or clothing looted from the shops? I have. And I have seen around headquarters caps bearing what was left of what once were plumes, and the tatters of gold braid, although it no longer glittered. I agree with Mr. de Rodyenka that the commanding generals frequently, if not usually, wear civilian dress at the front.

Whether the Chinese uncover or not when worshiping, I pass to more expert knowledge. But I *have* seen Japanese uncover, especially at the approach of the Imperial carriage.

THE Chinese soldier (I am speaking now of the product of the present day) may not be a coward, but I am willing to leave it to any foreign resident of China, familiar with the campaigns of the last five years, whether this same soldier has any stomach for real fighting. Witness the rout, in 1921, of one of the great armies there, started by a few machine-guns, interspliced by a few hundred oil-tins filled with firecrackers!

There are now a number of military airplanes in use in China, but until the recent trouble when Marshal Chan Tsao-lin did some bombing of military depots, they have been used almost not at all, to the best of my knowledge.

I believe this answers the points raised, except those which are matters of personal opinion. I found China largely a matter of personal opinion, no two experts agreeing. As for myself, I would not venture an opinion unless hard pressed.—HOBART C. MONTEE.

* * *

HOW do you like our magazine's new clothes? We've never paid very much attention to our clothes, putting our efforts, instead, on the job of trying to make the actual meat as worth while as we could, but it occurred to us that it would be a good thing to tidy up a bit.

One artist has always done all the story headings for each issue and this of late years included "Camp-Fire's" heading and the drawing for the contents page.

We've just extended that idea a little and now it covers the other departments. So in each issue all headings are now drawn by the same man, unifying the book a bit in general appearance and giving a little more variety.

Also thought it was about time to unify and renew the little "dingbats" that run in the text. So far as I know, *Adventure* was the first magazine to use dingbats in this way, though others have since copied the idea from us. Our collection of them was gathered during the years, the work of many different artists. Some of them were made from tail-pieces or other bits of illustration. A motley collection, added to from time to time as need arose. Some of them were pretty sad, but we'd got hardened to them and just went on plunking them into the text. But when the reform fever seized us we cleared out the whole lot and started all over again. Decided to have all done by the same artist and in the same general style for the sake of uniformity. Asked V. E. Pyles of our artist's brigade to do them for us and we hope you are as much pleased with his work as we are.

To our surprize, when he counted up how many subjects were needed we found the number ran to a bit over 400. Some of the designs wanted could not be made clear in so small a space, so the new ones were made four lines deep instead of three, which, take it all around, seems the best size all around.

In addition "A. A." and "Camp-Fire" each got its own special little dingbat and the latter decided to use logs instead of dashes between items. At least we hope it's a log; it's remarkably hard to make anything that small look like a real honest to goodness log for the "Fire."

Anyhow here we are in our new clothes and in our modest little way feeling all dressed up. You can't blame us much, either. It's about the first time in some fourteen years that we've done any dressing up worth mentioning.—A. S. H.

* * *

SERVICES TO OUR READERS

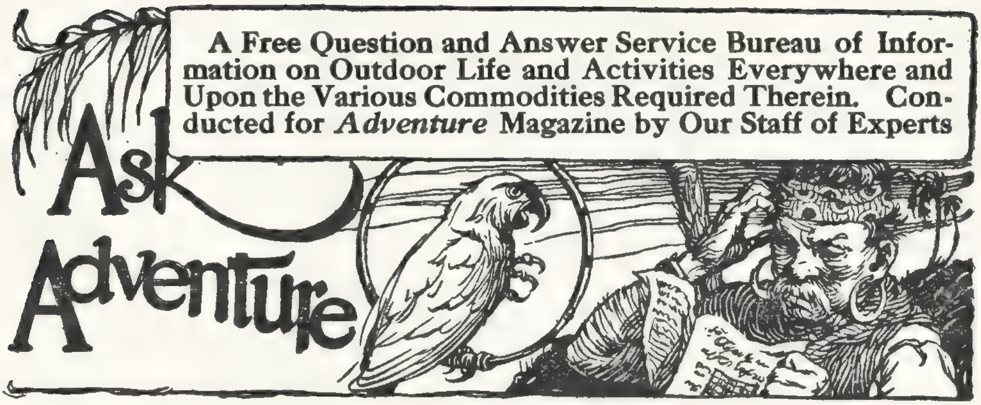
Lost Trails, for finding missing relatives and friends, runs in alternate issues from "Old Songs That Men Have Sung."

Old Songs That Men Have Sung, a section of "Ask Adventure," runs in alternate issues from "Lost Trails."

Camp-Fire Stations: explanation in the second and third issues of each month. Full list in second issue of each month.

Various Practical Services to Any Reader: Free Identification Card in eleven languages (metal, 25 cents); Mail Address and Forwarding Service; Back Issues Exchanged; Camp-Fire Buttons, etc., **runs in the last issue of each month.**

Ask Adventure



A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts

QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the section in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert may give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached,* are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union. Be sure that the issuing office stamps the coupon in the left-hand circle.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose section it seems to belong.**

Please Note: **To avoid using so much needed space each issue for standing matter and to gain more space for the actual meat of "Ask Adventure" the full statement of its various sections and of "Lost Trails" will be given only in alternate issues. In other issues only the bare names of the sections will be given, inquirers to get exact fields covered and names and addresses from full statement in alternate issues. Do *not* write to the magazine, but to the editors of the sections at their home addresses.**

1—3.	The Sea. In Three Parts
4—6.	Islands and Coasts. In Three Parts
7, 8.	New Zealand and the South Sea Islands. In Two Parts
9.	Australia and Tasmania
10.	Malaysia, Sumatra and Java
11.	New Guinea
12, 13.	Philippine and Hawaiian Islands
13—18.	Asia. In Five Parts
19—26.	Africa. In Eight Parts
27, 28.	Turkey and Asia Minor
29—35.	Europe. In Seven Parts
36—38.	South America. In Three Parts
39.	Central America.
40—42.	Mexico. In Three Parts
43—49.	Canada. In Seven Parts
50.	Alaska
51.	Baffinland and Greenland
52—57.	Western U. S. In Six Parts
58—62.	Middle Western U. S. In Five Parts
63—72.	Eastern U. S. In Ten Parts
A.	Radio
B.	Mining and Prospecting
C.	Old Songs That Men Have Sung
D 1—3.	Weapons, Past and Present. In Three Parts
E.	Salt and Fresh Water Fishing
F, G.	Forestry in the U. S. and Tropical Forestry
H—J.	Aviation, Army and Navy Matters
K.	American Anthropology North of Panama Canal
L.	First Aid on the Trail
M.	Health-Building Outdoors
N.	Railroading in the U. S., Mexico and Canada
O, P.	Herpetology and Entomology
	Standing Information

The Zeekoefontein Diamond Rush

THE luck of J. J. Tromp:

Request:—"Have any new diamond fields been opened up within the last year or so in Africa, and what chances would there be for a young man to go out to Africa with the idea of being among the first to get in on the newly discovered diamond area?"—George Stevens, Chicago, Ill.

Reply, by Capt. Franklin:—In answer to your letter I was unable to give you any definite information about recent diamond rushes before writing to England. The following satisfactory reply, however, has been received by me:

Three thousand people, including "poor whites," experienced diggers, students, clerks and even girls, took part in the wild race of peg claims on the new diamond diggings at Zeekoefontein, on the banks of the Vall River last July.

A short time previously a Mr. J. J. Tromp bought a farm in this vicinity, a poor, desperate sort of farm hidden away on a lonely part of the veld. Once in possession of the farm, however, he discovered diamondiferous soil and began working a valuable claim with some 200 natives which is now returning him an average of from 2,000 pounds to 3,000 pounds a week. According to general practise, therefore, the Government declared the area surrounding the farm a proclaimed area, and fixed a day for the rush. No fewer than 2,000 claim licenses were taken out during the three days preceding the rush, which thus made the event one of the biggest diamond rushes ever held in South Africa.

On the day appointed nearly 2,000 men and boys formed the far-flung line behind the mining commissioner, Mr. C. M. Jack, and his detachment of mounted police. A few athletic girls showed prominently in the waiting crowd. The long proclamation was read as the runners clashed their iron pegs and impatiently swayed in readiness to rush.

Soon after eleven o'clock struck the last words of the proclamation were read, and the line of flags was lowered in unison. So began the greatest rush ever seen by the mining commissioner, who has had many years of experience in the Transvaal.

For 500 yards the path was cleared. Youngsters in shorts and football jerseys and hardened old diggers drew ahead. Twenty donkeys charged before the oncoming rush, and thousands of Kaffirs on flanking *kopjes* raised a continuous cheering. A volley of curses rang out here and there as the more impetuous stumbled against their fellow-runners or blundered over boulders to the ground.

Trousers were torn and ripped by the thorn bushes, and many of the runners fell by the way.

But the great mass rushed on down the gully, which rapidly closed over the final 400 yards to where the site of the rich alluvial deposits lay around the owner's mine, which extends from the edge of the running water in the great sandy river bed. For 100 yards between the rocky ridges pegs were feverishly driven in. Several disputes occurred, but these were quietly settled by the officials.

Mr. J. J. Tromp, interviewed, said: "I can see very little valuable ground left for those who are digging today. Not 50 per cent. of my farm has alluvial deposit, and what there is I hold."

Mr. Tromp expressed himself as willing to do whatever he could for the poorer men.

"A lot of expensive apparatus is required to mine my ground," he said, "but I shall increase my workings and take on a lot of white men, but most will be gone from here within a month."

To show the richness of his reserve claims, Mr. Tromp stated that his was the heaviest gravel he had seen during fifteen years of prospecting on alluvial diamond fields, and his returns were equivalent to the highest obtained from any blue-ground pipes in South Africa.

"My largest stone," Mr. Tromp said, "has been one of 34½ carats, and it was a Cape Byewater stone; but I am receiving from twenty pounds to twenty-seven pounds per carat for the finest class of my stones, and that is a price above the average for South African diamonds."

Names and addresses of department editors and the exact field covered by each section are given in the next issue of the magazine. Do not write to the magazine itself.

A Snake-Proof Bed

HINTS for the desert hiker:

Request:—"My partner and I will be much obliged if you can give us some information or advice on the following topic:

We have been thinking of taking a long horseback trip due east from San José, or through Northern Arizona and Texas. If we got along O. K. we might make it a transcontinental trip. Now, we don't know much about this country, but have hiked and ridden in Canada.

Could a horse live on the country if he was eased along at a rate of twelve to fifteen miles a day, according to feed and trails?

Would you consider blankets and ground sheets preferable to sleeping-bag on such a trip?

Would you advise packing a small tent along as protection against mosquitoes?

If taken, would it involve the use of a pack-animal?

What would you consider to be the best all around firearm to pack, both for protection and filling the pot?

What would be the best part of the State to pick up mounts, and what would you consider a fair price for an average saddle horse?

What route would you suggest as being the best for an outfit of this kind, say eastward between San José and Los Angeles?

Have many people made the trip across the U. S. in this manner? We could go by flivver but, shucks, where's the kick in that?

Perhaps all this is not included in your field, but your opinion will be highly valued, or you could perhaps refer us to some one who could help us some; we could hardly decide who to write to amongst the "Adventure" experts, on this lay-out.

If this should get into print, please omit my name, or use initials."—B. O., San José, Calif.

Reply, by Mr. Harriman:—In undertaking a horseback trip from this coast east, you must first of all consider the hundreds of miles of desert to cross. You should not start before May 1, and even then you will find it cold nights on the desert. Your horse would find it poor picking along a large portion of the journey and should have grain in order to get him across the desert at all. Therefore a burro would be essential.

A horse who knew the desert and how to forage there, would make it, but one not accustomed to a desert would have a sorry time.

A dear friend of mine rode a horse all over the Mohave Desert, camping out, but his horse was an Indian pony accustomed to the desert.

Get fast-walking horses and let them walk. Keep them up to their gait and do not let them loaf, but walk them.

A sleeping bag on the desert is folly for two reasons—too hot and too hard to get out of if a rattlesnake gets in. Have canvas ground-sheets wide and long enough to allow you to turn them up ten inches all around. Provide one-quarter-inch rods, sharp at one end, a ring turned in the other end. Rods eighteen inches long. Sew snaps on ground sheet at the corners, in the middle of each end and two or three on each side.

Lay sheet on ground, arrange blankets on it, turn up sheet and stick rods in ground, fastening snaps in the ring tops. If done in a proper manner, it is snake proof, as no snake will surmount that side when lifted thus. One dozen pins to a bed.

Use rods as per diagram shown below:

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A second canvas placed to cover bed and hang over outside of rods is all I would use for rain. Darn the skeeters. Forget 'em. I do.

I use a canvas six by fifteen feet, make my bed on one end, turn the other up over. Have bed made three feet down from end and haul end over head. Turn sides up, bring top down outside and pin with horseblanket pins, if weather is cold. If not cold, omit pins and most of my blankets go under me. I use a thin pad as a mattress, one and one-half inches thick.

Do not load your saddle horses with bed, cooking kit, etcetera. A burro costs little, he lives off the country and he save horses.

What would you fill the pot with, when traveling during closed season? Try it once and see how soon you fill a cell.

I pack a Smith & Wesson .32-.20 myself, usually, though sometimes I take my .45 Colt. Anything accurate and handy is all right. Keep in mind the fact that toting a pistol or revolver without a permit is a felony in California and some other states, especially Texas.

The farther you get into the back country, the more likely you are to find saddle horses cheap. That is all I can tell you about that. I have not bought a horse since 1899, so know little of prices.

I would ride down through Imperial Valley, as that gives you land that produces grass for a longer distance toward the Arizona line.

There will be more feed on the desert in May than later, also, so get off by the first or the last week of April.

Few have ridden a horse clear across the country, practically none of late years.

Macao

WHERE gambling is the principal "industry":

Request:—"I am very seriously considering going to China to locate permanently or at least for a period of five years or more, and for that reason am writing you for certain information. I might say that I have a very good Chinese friend, at present located in Macao, who has been urging me for some time to come to China. He advises that I should experience no difficulty in securing a fairly good position. He also says that there are wonderful opportunities for young American fellows in China.

What are the general living conditions in China as compared to this country? Are they as cheap as I have often heard said? How about the climate?

What chance would I stand of securing a fairly good position with a good outlook for the future? I am twenty-two years old, have had several years experience in business in general, have had some training in salesmanship, both practical and theoretical. I am fairly well familiar with electricity, radio especially.

Any other information that you think will be of assistance in helping me arrive at a definite decision will be greatly appreciated."—Norman S. Morris, South Boston, Mass.

Reply, by Mr. Halton:—With your qualifications you ought not to have much difficulty obtaining a position in China, though I think it very inadvisable to proceed there unless you have a position to go to as most employees are engaged for a number of years under contract.

Macao is a Portuguese settlement southwest of Hongkong; gambling is the principal industry(?). Hongkong would be the logical place for you to go and undoubtedly your friend at Macao has a large number of acquaintances in Hongkong.

Generally speaking, living should be less costly than in the States at present prices. Clothing and food are cheaper and shoes and other imported articles are of course higher.

The temperature in South China, which lies in the same latitude as Cuba, rarely falls below 40 degrees in winter and rises in the summer to a maximum of about 98 degrees. The summers are, however, very humid and unpleasant.

I would first have your Macao friend put you in touch with the business houses of Hongkong.

Accompany your inquiry with stamped, self-addressed envelop.

Indian Customs

WHERE they changed their names when they have a dream.

Request:—"A few questions if you please:

Can you give me a bit of history about the New Mexican Indians or refer me to a work and where I can purchase it?

What is the tribal ceremony at the marriage of an Indian, and how was the wedding conducted?

Did they live in tents? or cliff dwellings?

Can you tell me something of Indian warfare? and weapons used?

The above questions are concerning the tribes of Indians I asked you about in the first question.

I have heard the first mission in America was built in New Mexico. Could you tell me something of it?

What per cent. of New Mexico is desert?

And lastly. Where could I procure a picture book of New Mexico?

I hope you will not have any great difficulty in answering my questions."—Leona Peak, Chicago, Ill.

Reply, by Mr. H. F. Robinson:—You certainly have set me a task, for the questions you have asked would make topics for a book. I will do the best I can in the brief space I can use in a letter.

New Mexico had and has two distinct types of Indians, the nomadic Indians such as the Apache and the Navajo and the town-dwelling Indian, the Pueblo Indian who lived in towns, practised agriculture, having irrigation canals and well cultivated farms. These two classes were enemies, the former coming down on the latter and robbing them of the fruits of their fields. I do not know whether this will answer your question or not.

Children are not named as we name them. There is no such a thing as a family name. A child is given a name on birth, At later periods other names are given at the critical epochs of life, such as puberty, the first war expedition, elevation to chieftainship and perhaps at retirement from active life among the men and at puberty or child-birth among the women.

The child or baby name was usually given because of some sign, a dream of the mother, some passing incident. At the later period the name was suggested by some action, or a dream of the young man. Among most tribes it was considered discourteous to address a person by his name. This was perhaps, because of some sacred significance to the original name. Among the Navajos a man never uses his own name, but in these days when a name is necessary he uses some other designation, and if he moves from one locality his name may be changed, for at home he may be known as his father's son, in another locality where his father may be unknown he will be called somebody's brother or son-in-law or friend, the one from whom he gets his designation being known in that section.

Nowadays practically all of the Indians have a "white" or commercial name, generally given in school or by some official of the Indian Service by which he is known officially.

For something about the various tribes of New Mexico Indians I would refer you to the bibliography at the end of the enclosed printed sheet. You can probably get any or all of the information in the Chicago Public Library.

As there are perhaps 180 tribes of Indians in the United States today and the tribal ceremony of marriage is different in each tribe it is rather difficult to answer this question also. In some tribes the ceremony is entirely absent. The man pays over to the father of the girl a prescribed price and carries her off to his tent. Other tribes have very elaborate ceremonies. Some tribes were strictly monogamous and in others polygamy was practised. Among the Pueblos of New Mexico where they have been practically civilized for many hundreds of years there is no purchase of wives. The affair is managed much as we might, though sometimes it is arranged by the parents of the contracting couples.

Monogamy is the general rule, the economic factor of the support of more than one wife seems to be largely the dominating one. Actual purchase is not common; usually it is an interchange of presents. The marriage bonds are loose, and may, with few exceptions, be dissolved by the wife as well as by the husband. The children generally stay with the mother, and always do in tribes having maternal clans. In practically all of the tribes in New Mexico the children belong to the mother and are members of her clan, and descent goes through the maternal line.

THE Indians of New Mexico differ, as I have said, in their mode of living. The Pueblos live in good houses, plastered and whitewashed, with fireplaces, doors and windows, as comfortable houses as you or I occupy. The Navajos live in a hut, called a *hogan*, of one room, no windows and an open place in the top for light, ventilation and to allow the smoke to get away. The Apaches live in something similar only cruder, and some of them live in teepees. There have been no cliff dwellers within historic times.

I can not tell you much of warfare among the Indians of this section. The Indians distinguished them as of offense and defense. War parties varied from a few men to large parties. The Pueblos did very little offensive warfare as they were a peaceful people.

The weapons of offense striking weapons such as clubs, sometimes of wood and perhaps weighted with a stone. Missile weapons were thrown from a sling, from a throwing stick or from a bow. Some of the plains Indians used lances.

For defense they used shields, usually made of rawhide.

New Mexico is the oldest settled part of the United States, being first visited by the Spaniards in 1540, and the first permanent settlements were made in 1592. Within the next hundred years a large number of missions had been built. During the uprising of 1680 many were destroyed, but following the reconquest of 1692 they were in the most part rebuilt.

Get the "Land of the Delight Makers," by George Wharton James, from the library. This will tell you a lot about the early history and of the missions of New Mexico. It will also go far to satisfy you regarding some pictures of New Mexico.

Any land that will not raise crops without irrigation is considered "desert." It is commonly understood that land with less than 20 inches of rainfall is considered arid. On that basis three-fourths of New Mexico comes in that category although the largest forests of pine now standing on the continent are in New Mexico.

I do not just understand what you mean by a "picture book" of New Mexico. See the books I have referred you to, which you can do in the library and you will have lots of pictures. You can send to Fred Harvey at Kansas City or at any of the large stations along the Sante Fé Railroad and get a large number of fine picture post-cards of New Mexico and the Indians and also books of similar pictures, at a small cost.

A two-cent stamp won't carry everywhere.

Making Gugus Talk

THE sound of a Krag cracking helps muchly:

Request—"I was in Troop H, Fifth U. S. Cav., arriving in the Philippine Islands aboard the old *Kilpatrick* about July 30th, 1902. We were stationed at Pasay Garrison for a while, then went up to San Mateo where General Lawton was killed and patrolled the Mariquina River and tributaries till sent back to Fort Wingate, N. M., in September or October, 1903.

A non-com named Heinz was transferred to our troop when his outfit went back to the States some time in 1903. He was a most gorgeous liar, and it was his delight to get a bunch of rookies around him and spill a lot of fables of which he was always the hero. He had evidently been all over the islands and no doubt had seen quite a lot and though he was ignorant and uneducated he was a natural-born story teller with an excellent sense of the dramatic.

However, the story he used to tell on which I am going to ask you to check up if possible ran something like this:

A soldier named Parker (?) who had been a school teacher before enlisting had been appointed teacher in some little *barrio* in northern Luzon and shortly thereafter was killed by a raiding party of natives. Several months afterward Heinz, who claimed to be a close friend of Parker's, was in command of a small detachment in a town near where Parker was killed, and one of the men saw a native with a gold watch and took it away from him and found Parker's name inside. He took it to Heinz, and he rounded up all the male gugus in town and drove them into the courtyard of the church where his men held them under their guns while he lined them up and questioned them. All denied knowledge of the identity of the murderers, so Heinz took the nearest man by the collar of his *camisa* and led him outside.

A shot was heard, and Heinz came back with a smoking revolver and questioned them again. Again they denied knowing anything, and he took out the second man and so on till six had been taken out, when they weakened and pushed out six men as the murderers of Parker. After putting these men under guard he released the rest, and outside the courtyard they found the men he had let out unharmed, as he had taken them out and then fired in the air.

I often wondered if there was any foundation for the yarn and thought if there was you might have heard of the occurrence. Anyway, it was a thriller the way Heinz told it. And you should have heard him tell of being at the head of a column coming in to an *insurrecto* town in the first gray light of the morning with a Maccabebe scout in the lead and of seeing a naked leg hanging down through the leaves of an overhanging mango bough, and of how the line halted and the Maccabebe slipped forward and climbed the mango, slipping along like a tightrope walker with his bolo poised and of the solid *chuck* when he split the gugu's head. The rookies' eyes, mine included, used to stick out like onions when Heinz got going good.

You will pardon this rambling letter as I have met only one or two men since leaving the service twenty years ago who were in the islands, and I've never had much of a chance to yarn.

I got a disability discharge at Fort Wingate in April, 1904, and have been in California ever since. Had a foot broken and, though I tried, the medical examiners kept me out of the big fuss."—C. S. HEAD, Huntington Park, Calif.

Reply, by Mr. Connor:—I remember one afternoon in 1901 while cooperating with Captain Butt's—he went down in the *Titanic*—scouts, that same method of getting natives to speak was used. A small detachment corralled a bunch of them, and Butt would ask a question through an interpreter but the native did not savvy—at least that was his words. A nod to a soldier, and the native was led over the little hill. The report of a Krag rifle, and the soldier returned to the group.

Another was asked a question, and the usual "No savvy!" Another soldier took him over the little hill. Another report of a Krag, and the soldier returned.

About the next *hombre* who was asked a question told all he knew and considerably more, and put us on a long hike into the inland.

Yes, many such experiences are recorded from the islands, and such things as a human leg, arm or hacked body on a trail were found several times. Such things as a spread-eagled man with his body slashed and stabbed with bolo cuts and native cane sirup poured over him to torment him with flies, also occurred in Panay Island and between Concepcion and Capiz on a mountain trail.

Do not tab the non-com as a liar, because he was there when things were scary, I'm tellin' yuh. I do not lay claim to prevaricating, but I venture that I could sit all night by the Camp-Fire's burning log and tell you yarns of foundation, experienced and heard from some one who was present, regarding unusual happenings in the islands.

Why do you not hunt up a group of Spanish-American War vets, or get in touch with the Gresham Post, Vets of Foreign Wars? They meet at the Moose Hall next to the Hill Street station.

Address your question direct to the expert in charge, NOT to the magazine.

Hunting Egrets in Brazil

IT MAY be good business but it's darn poor sport:

Request:—"Are there any birds in the part of South America that you cover that are killed for their plumes?"—JOHN HARTNEY, Graceville, Minn.

Reply, by Mr. Barbour:—In Paraguay and parts of Brazil a great many white egrets, called in Spanish *garza blanca*, are killed for their plumes.

It is the long, white wing feathers, which grow out at nesting time, that are valuable.

While there are no laws against killing them, any one who does so in my opinion is a rotten poor sportsman, to put it mildly. It is the females that have the plumes, and killing her makes the whole nest of fledglings starve to death.

It is for that reason that the U. S. laws prohibit the importation of any plumes except ostrich, the latter being obtained without killing the birds.

The small wild ostriches of Argentina are sometimes killed for their tail feathers, which are used for feather dusters, etc.

North Carolina Fisheries

CENTER of the caviar industry:

Request:—"I have been considering a trip down the Atlantic Coast next spring with a couple of buddies. We have all been over the most of the route before and thought we would take our time and earn our passage this trip.

We hear that Delaware sturgeon are scarce and bring good money. What would you say to laying over for three or four weeks and drifting for some?

What size net would be necessary, *i.e.*, length, mesh, full particulars? When do the sturgeon usually start running and how long does the run last? We have an idea they are a little behind the shad but aren't sure."—HOWARD M. BRIGGS, Waterville, Maine.

Reply, by Mr. Shannon:—For many years there were few sturgeon in the Delaware, and then in 1920 they reappeared and some large catches were made. I haven't been in that section since and can not speak for the last two seasons.

The fish are found in April and May and are caught with a seine running from 300 to 600 feet in length of approximately three inch mesh, about eight feet deep. If you are familiar with commercial fishing you will understand what I mean when I say they are caught by "drifting."

In other words the seine is set and allowed to drift with the tide over a given territory. Newcastle, Delaware, is I believe the headquarters for the Delaware sturgeon fishermen, and most of the fishing is done at night when the river is free from traffic of the ocean-going variety.

However if you have sturgeon on the brain why not try the North Carolina coast where hundreds of boats and fishermen are engaged in this particular variety of fishing and where the catch is usually an assured fact.

As you probably know the roe is converted into caviar by a very simple process—the application of German salt in a particular proportion. This caviar is packed in kegs or kits holding one hundred and twenty pounds and shipped to New York for export. It brings from thirty-five to fifty cents per pound, depending upon market conditions.

In Delaware the flesh of the sturgeon is sold for about twenty cents per pound, but there seems to be no demand for it in North Carolina.

New Zealand's Papers

THE best newspapered country in theworld:

Request:—"Your name was given me recently by a newspaper man with the passing remark that you could tell me something of the newspapers in New Zealand, both in regard to the weekly and daily field.

I would appreciate it very much if you could tell me something of the newspapers, their number, circulation, and in fact all that a working newspaperman would like to know."—WILBUR H. ROSE, Spencer, W. Va.

Reply, by Mr. Mills:—It has been said of this country these many years that New Zealand is "the best newspapered country in the world." A large claim, when one considers that other paper country, the U. S. A. But the fact is that there is scarcely a settlement, no matter how small, that has not its local organ.

But our figures speak for themselves, when you consider that there are only 1,300,000 people, men, women and children, in the whole country. In July of this year, the latest returns available, there were 297 publications on the Register of Newspapers for New Zealand. Of these, some sixty-one are published daily, eighteen being morning and forty-three evening papers, while twenty-four appear three times per week, thirty twice per week, seventy weekly, one every ten days, eight fortnightly and 103 monthly.

I'm not quite sure just what you want to know further. Our printing houses are all up-to-date in their equipment, with the latest machinery from the shops of England and U. S. Take my own office, a country paper in a town of 4,000 population. The *Star* issues two editions each afternoon, it has eight pages, and we have three linotype machines and a flat-bed rotary printing machine, run by electric power. And yet the city of Wellington, with its three big dailies, is only 100 miles away. There are daily papers published within fifty and eighty-seven miles of Wellington, the capital city, and within thirteen miles of Feilding there is a town of 12,000 people, with two daily papers. That will give you some indication of the local spirit that prevails throughout this dominion, for all papers are doing well.

The "Mounties"

HERE are the requirements of this famous corps:

Request:—"I have traveled in many lands—South Africa, India and China—and have also taken part in the Zaka-kel expedition under General Sir James Wilcox in India in 1908, and have also seen active service in the Great War for four years.

I am a great lover of the saddle having served in the 17th Lancers (Death or Glory Boys) for nine years, and am now desirous of joining the "North West Mounted Police." Could you therefore give information about the life, duties and qualifications you would require for such a position?

I am thirty-two years of age, five feet eleven inches in height and weigh one hundred and sixty-three pounds. I also could furnish the highest references if necessary.

Regarding filing an application could I do it from this country or would I require to go to Ottawa, Canada, for such a procedure?"—JOHN ELDER, Philadelphia, Pa.

Reply, by Mr. Sangster:—Full particulars of the former N. W. M. Police, now known as the Canadian Royal Mounted Police, may be had by writing the Commissioner, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Canada.

You have to be a British subject over eighteen and under forty-five, at least five feet six inches and in A-1 health.

Their duties have greatly changed since ten years ago and much of their work is now in the cities.

I served in the old Force myself, but then things were vastly different. My old regimental number was 3866.

Old Songs That Men Have Sung

Devoted to outdoor songs, preferably hitherto unprinted—songs of the sea, the lumber-camps, Great Lakes, the West, old canal days, the negro, mountains, the pioneers, etc. Send in what you have or find, so that all may share in them.

Although conducted primarily for the collection and preservation of old songs, the editor will give information about modern ones when he can do so and *IF* all requests are accompanied with self-addressed envelop and reply postage (*NOT* attached). Write to Mr. Gordon direct, *NOT* to the magazine.

Conducted by R. W. GORDON, 4 Conant Hall, Cambridge, Mass.

A LITTLE over a year ago, in the August 10th issue of this department, appeared a version of "Frankie and Johnny" with a request for information concerning its origin. The replies that came in contained many interesting scraps of information on the curious history of this wayward song or gave additional texts and stanzas. No two correspondents, however, were in agreement as to its age, the district in which it originated, or the incidents on which it was founded.

The texts sent in differed greatly. Although the general outline of the story was the same in all of them, they were not the same in respect to the names used for the various characters, the details of the shooting, or the final fate of "Frankie." Other versions published since that time show even wider variations.

Compare, for example, the verses quoted below from a recent and most excellent collection (*Folk-Songs of the South*, edited by John Harrington Cox, Harvard University Press, 1925, page 218) with the longer version sent me from Los Angeles by L. G. in 1923.

Maggie Was a Lady

(*A portion of a text obtained by John Harrington Cox in West Virginia in* 1918.)

Maggie was a lady,
A money-making girl;
She made all the money she could rake and scrape,
And gave it to her darling pearl.
O he's my man, but he done me wrong.

Miss Maggie went down to the bar-room,
She called for a glass of beer:
"Say, Mr. Greeda, will you tell me no lie?
Has my darling Walter been here?
O he's my man, but he did me wrong.

"Miss Maggie, I'll tell you no story,
Miss Maggie, I'll tell you no lie:
Your Walter left here about an hour ago
With a girl called Lily Fry."
O he's my man, but he did me wrong.

Frankie and Johnnie

(*Text from L. G., Los Angeles*, 1923, *as learned by him in Manila, P. I.*)

Frankie and Johnnie were lovers,
Oh, Lordy, how they could love;
Swore to be true to each other,
Just as true as the stars above.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

Frankie was a good girl,
As everybody knows;
She paid one hundred dollars
For Johnnie a suit of clothes.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

Frankie went to Memphis—
She went on the morning train—
She paid one hundred dollars
For Johnnie a watch and chain.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

Johnnie went down to the corner saloon,
He called for a glass of beer;
Frankie went down in an hour or so,
And said, "Has Johnnie Dean been here?
Oh, he's my man,
But he's done me wrong."

"I'll not tell you no stories,
I'll not tell you no lies,
Johnnie left here about an hour ago
With a girl called Ella Fly.
Oh, he's your man,
But he's done you wrong."

Then Frankie went out walking,
She didn't go for fun;
In her little apron pocket
She carried a forty-one.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

Frankie went to the gallery
To see what she could see.
There she saw little Johnnie
A-sitting on Ella's knee.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

Frankie called little Johnnie,
She called him out to the front;
Frankie called little Johnnie out
And she shot him with her forty-one.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

"Oh, turn me over, Frankie,
Oh, turn me over slow;
Turn me over my right side,
For my left one hurts me so.
Oh, I'm your man,
But I've done you wrong."

Frankie went to Mrs. Halcomb,
She fell down on her knees;
She said, "Mrs. Halcomb, forgive me,
Forgive me, if you please.
For I've killed my man,
But he done me wrong."

"Forgive you, Frankie darling,
Forgive you I never can,—
Forgive you, Frankie darling
For killing your only man!
For he was your man,
Tho' he'd done you wrong."

A rubber-tired buggy,
A decorated hack,
Will take poor Johnnie to the graveyard
But it will not bring him back.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

Frankie went to his coffin,
She looked down on his face;
She said, Oh Lord, have mercy on me,
I wish I could take his place.
Oh, he was my man,
But he done me wrong."

A rubber-tired buggy,
A silver-seated hack,
Took poor Frankie to the jail house,
But it did not bring her back.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

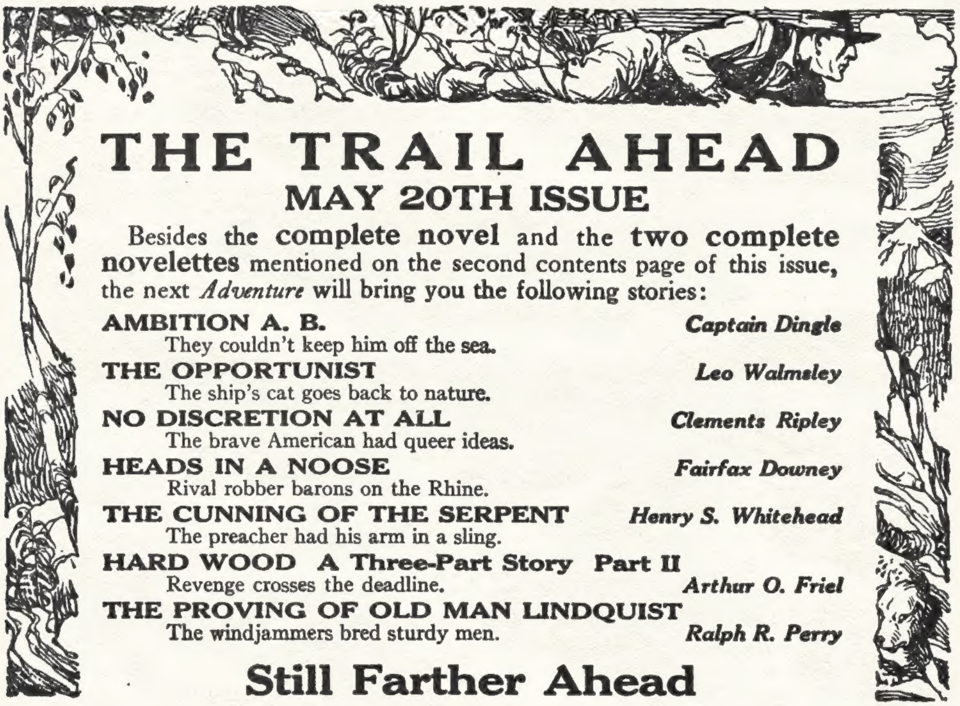
Frankie heard a rumbling
Away down in the ground;
Perhaps it was little Johnnie
Where she had shot him down.
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

Johnnie was a gambler,
He gambled for the gain;
The very last words he ever said,
Were, "High, low, jack, and the game."
Oh, he was her man,
But he done her wrong.

Frankie is now in her parlor,
Fanning with an electric fan,
Saying to her little sister,
"Don't you marry a gambling man,
For he'll get drunk,
And do you wrong."

TO THE reader who sends in the most valuable reply containing information about this song, or a text of it, within one month from the date of publication of this issue, I'll personally give a paid-up six months' subscription to *Adventure*. Send in whatever you know, and ask your friends to help you gather information and additional versions. BUT send all material *just as it comes to you;* do not change it or amend it in the slightest degree.

SEND all contributions of old songs, and all requests for them, direct to R. W. GORDON, 4 Conant Hall, Cambridge, Massachusetts. DO NOT send them to the magazine.



THE TRAIL AHEAD

MAY 20TH ISSUE

Besides the **complete novel** and the **two complete novelettes** mentioned on the second contents page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories:

AMBITION A. B. — ***Captain Dingle***
They couldn't keep him off the sea.

THE OPPORTUNIST — ***Leo Walmsley***
The ship's cat goes back to nature.

NO DISCRETION AT ALL — ***Clements Ripley***
The brave American had queer ideas.

HEADS IN A NOOSE — ***Fairfax Downey***
Rival robber barons on the Rhine.

THE CUNNING OF THE SERPENT — ***Henry S. Whitehead***
The preacher had his arm in a sling.

HARD WOOD A Three-Part Story Part II — ***Arthur O. Friel***
Revenge crosses the deadline.

THE PROVING OF OLD MAN LINDQUIST — ***Ralph R. Perry***
The windjammers bred sturdy men.

Still Farther Ahead

THE three issues following the next will contain *long* stories by Leonard H. Nason, Hugh Pendexter, L. Patrick Greene, Frank Robertson, Talbot Mundy, Gordon MacCreagh, W. C. Tuttle, James Aton, T. Samson Miller, and Wm. Byron Mowery; and short stories by Rolf Bennett, F. St. Mars, John Beames, David Thibault, Howard Ellis Davis, William Westrup, Theodore Seixas Solomons, John Webb, Charles King Van Riper, Raymond S. Spears, Negley Farson and others; stories of doughboys on the Western Front, traders in South Africa, skippers off Georges Banks, ancient Romans in the British Isles, explorers up the Amazon, cowboys on the Western range, mounted police in the Northwest, British aviators in Egypt.

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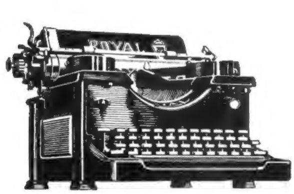

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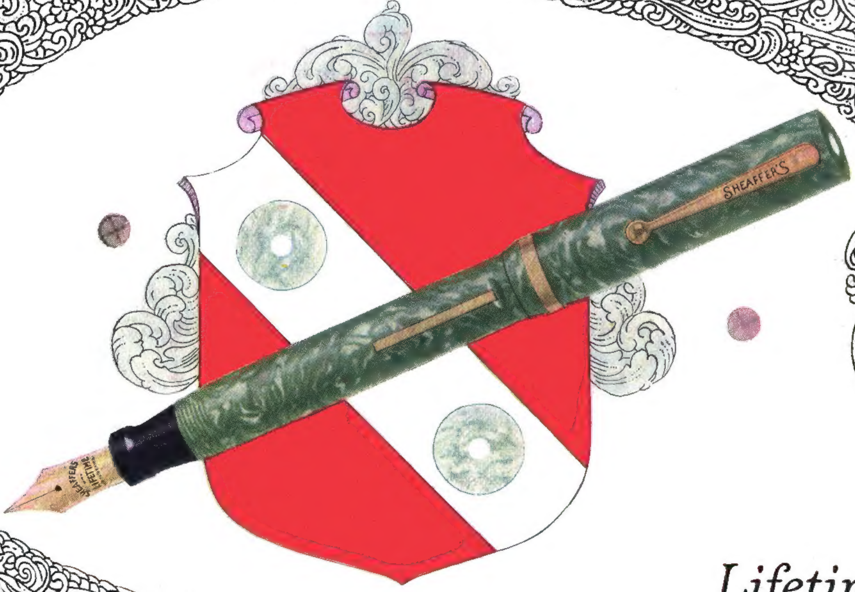

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